

THE

GATEKEEPER

REVOLT



APLINIO

TADEU DE

GOES JR.

NOVEL

The Gatekeeper Revolt

A NOVEL

by

Plínio Tadeu de Góes Jr.

A medical man told me he judged his patients by a standard of normalcy - the medical fellow himself had been married three times, had fathered six children and eventually died naked in a boarding house holding a long, black broom. No one ever discovered the cause of death, the reason he had been naked, or the purpose of that broom. Mental normalcy is relative at best.

Herein, I lay bare the innermost thoughts of one man, not even a special man. I came to know him through a vision. Before the reader asks if I too am mad, I reply that I am indeed insane for I believe in the power of his dreams as much as I believe in the sun shining upon my face as I write these words in the early morning, before the hunger for sleep has struck me hard and forced me to slumber through the rambling days.

I am an old soul and my visage grows wearier with each fleeting moment. I draw some of the happenings herein from my grandfather's diary. Others I created to fill gaps, using my very own intuition, vision, and creative flair. Perhaps, there is more of myself here than I would care to admit. I hope you enjoy and learn from these humble words written by shaking hands constructed out of parchment, almost devoid of life, awaiting the release of an eternal sleep.

One final thing before you begin your journey. You hold in your hands the story of my grandfather's *entire mind*, his very consciousness. As I will explain, I saved him from a life of constant torture. He was as old as I am now when I saved him, over one hundred years of a hard life having corrupted his good sense. He lived another two years after I set him free, two years he spent mumbling to himself, staring into space, writing. At first, I assumed his writings were the product of a depraved mind, a narrative of madness produced by a guilty conscience. Yet, as I myself approach the end of my existence, amidst so much progress, I cannot help but doubt that he was insane. I believe that his mad speeches, spoken in downpours of words while I sat bewildered, held a deeper meaning to be discerned by logic. In the end, he died alone, clutching his papers, rosary beads hanging from his neck. I came to understand him better from reading his

papers and I forgive him now for all his hurtful treachery. Your journey into his psyche begins now.

Those eyes were tornadoes of hollowness sinking deviously into his petrified white skull face. He meticulously perused the embers, running his gaze over the multitudes of jagged hills and valleys and bright rivers of red lava. The clouds of smoke floating just under the ceiling of the massive cavern cast shadows, obstructing his sight, but *The Mirage could feel it*. The Mirage knew that the perpetrators of the deed had long ago disappeared.

“The Condemned saw nothing?” He asked.

“Nothing,” responded the Overseer, trembling like a lost child. The Overseer searched The Mirage’s face for emotion. But he saw *nothing*. Literally *nothing*. The Mirage’s immaculately pallid face, aside from unnerving twin pools of blackness, was composed of a lipless, steady mouth and teeth lined up like piano keys. The Mirage had two gaping holes where his ears should have been, two massive holes instead of eyes, and two holes instead of a nose. A skinny creature with long fingers, no genitalia, no clothing. A large, round head over a stick frame swaying in the breeze like a leafless tree as the volcanoes exploded angrily, sending streams of melted rock into rivers cutting apart the scorched red earth.

“There were thirty of the Condemned burning in the stream while you stood on the shore whipping them, and not one of you saw a damn thing? Not *you* nor any of *them*?” The Mirage stared at the Overseer accusingly. The Overseer bowed his head humbly, his black whip drooping onto the ground, the rusty nails adorning the contraption clanging softly. The Overseer’s body was covered with black scales from head to toe, from his massive hands and their long claws to his rapine eyes, two stones of onyx.

The Overseer replied softly: “I saw nothing and neither did any of the Condemned entrusted to me. I spoke to each of them individually. I cut through their bellies and pulled out their entrails. They would have told me the truth. I know it.”

The Overseer had gone from cell to cell in the main Infernal Complex, assaulting each of the Condemned he had been torturing earlier that day. He had painted their cells red, asking them over and over again. *Had they seen anything? Anything at all?!?* to explain the unexplainable.

They had seen *nothing*. They had been burning, their flesh melting off their frames, their eyes closed tightly as they reeled in agony, their dirty fingernails ripping the flesh off their own starved cheeks, their terrified eyes gazing at the invisible Heavens begging for a mercy that would never come. The Overseer had been whipping them, the nails of his whip viciously tearing apart the flesh on their backs, when he had gazed behind him and...the demon had disappeared...

At first, the Overseer had naturally assumed that the demon had simply left. After all, what was he but a mere Overseer, one of hundreds, all of them interchangeable, sexless, lifeless? The governing demons could come and go as they pleased without his permission. He wasn't charged with knowing *anything*. He was only charged with relentlessly torturing the Condemned entrusted to him— the thieves, murderers, child pornographers, rapists, and professional assassins.

A mere half hour after the Condemned had been sent back to their cells, The Mirage had come to see him, to interrogate him about the missing demon. He had gone missing? How could a demon disappear into thin air? One minute, the demon had been standing behind him, gazing at him, supervising his work, and the next the demon had melted away.

“He just disappeared, sir!” the Overseer reiterated emphatically. “He had been watching me, as he does every day, silent, standing on the hill behind me. Then, he was gone! I assumed he had been called. I finished my round of whippings, chained the Condemned and escorted them back to the Complex. A half hour later, you came and told me he had gone missing. I ripped the Condemned apart, interrogating them whether they had seen something, but they all said the same thing – *they had seen nothing*. Then, you came back to me, sir, and said that I should come out here with you, show you where it happened . . . and here we are . . .”

“I am told he was an evil Master, that he enjoyed torturing the Condemned, of course- ”

The Mirage paused to gaze at the Overseer with his piercingly hollow gaze, his mind working furiously behind his misleading blankness. “-but I also heard that his cruelty led him to engage in the practice of torturing his *Overseers*. It is not impossible that this has caused resentment . . .”

The Overseer squealed. The demon Andrealphus had been a cruel Master, indeed. His body had been that of a fat peacock with garish purple and green feathers but his bloated head that of a man with red eyes and a wide smile. He would wear a massive purple turban adorned with jewels. His arms? Two muscular human limbs protruding menacingly from his feathers. He had often used those arms to beat his Overseer, hurt him, for no reason other than a desire to cause pain. But now, Andrealphus was *gone* – and the Overseer could hardly suppress a tiny flame of satisfaction.

“I have always been loyal to my Master, sir,” the Overseer responded, staring at the ground. “I cherished him as is the role of every Overseer. Aside from the fact . . . that I would have no idea how to hurt him. I did not know such a thing was possible.”

This last point perplexed The Mirage. It *wasn't* possible. A demon could never be killed except by a Seraphim! If a demon had taken possession of a human, he could be driven out of the human and back to the Dark Desert, but no human, Overseer, Condemned, or other demon can capture or destroy a demon. Why would a Seraphim come to the underworld?

“Perhaps, Andrealphus went on a mission,” the Overseer suggested. “An urgent matter. Something he spoke to no one about.”

“No,” The Mirage replied, his long, blue, lizard tongue lashing about. “I was sent here by Baal himself. Andrealphus has not reported. He has not spoken to anyone.”

That said, The Mirage turned and walked to his horse, a black steed with fulminating orange orbs for eyes. The Mirage deftly climbed atop his animal and clung tightly to the mane with his spindly fingers. He whistled and the horse came alive as if shocked by a bolt of lightning, shooting black smoke out of its nostrils, turning away and racing into the distance,

leaping fearlessly over gaping cracks and red scalding rivers of molten rock, pitiful emaciated forms of cunning men and traitorous women, and three-headed snakes crawling along this damned desert within the bowels of the underworld.

The cries of the wicked twisted around him like smoke as he plowed through the melodies of longing, prayers for mercy directed at a God that had long ago cursed them to these glowing lakes. They longed for a return to the human realm, where they had sown the seeds of their suffering. The harvest of that suffering could be seen everywhere – an amalgam of melted flesh, blood, and decrepitude.

If The Mirage could smile, he would have smiled as he rode past the Overseers and their slaves. He was heading to the Great Hall, to report to Baal and the remainder of the demonic counsel . . . to the Great Hall . . .to the Great Hall, where the terrible creature with the unmentionable name could be found...

And there it was!

Directly in front of him. The Great Hall, a shadowy, imposing structure with dirty brick walls and a gate with uninviting iron spikes casually displaying the heads of massive, impaled snakes. The snakeheads sang in unison, a tune sung in the demonic language. Their forked tongues protruded from behind their razor-sharp teeth inside dark green, ominous mouths.

“The Dark One reigns here!” they sang. “Beware he who enters, delicious we will find your pain to be...” As The Mirage approached, the snakeheads turned to face him, smiling warmly. They spit forth their venom onto the sand. “We welcome The Mirage, servant of those who lie within these walls.”

The snakeheads closed their eyes and the iron gates swung open noiselessly to reveal a long tunnel illuminated by numerous torches leading him into the stomach of the castle. The Mirage strolled past the tiles on the walls decorated with messages written in the ancient tongue and figures from the Covenant: *Baal, Belphegor, Mammon, Abbadon, Satan, Asmodeus, and the slithering Leviathan.*

The Great Demon Baal was awaiting him when he reached the chamber. Baal was straddling a small pile of bones, gnawing upon a long, white femur. He cast aside the bone when he saw The Mirage enter the square chamber and sit before him on a wooden chair. All three of Baal's heads turned to The Mirage. Baal's frog head licked its lips while his cathead hissed and his human head, with its purple crown and sad, old eyes sinking into a damaged, wrinkled face, smirked.

"I take it you found *nothing*," Baal's human head spat. "Otherwise you would not be entering this chamber so slowly, so full of obvious hesitation. You would have burst into this place full of wonderful news to ingratiate yourself to me, if you had any *real* information to give me."

The Mirage bowed and replied: "I am sorry. The Overseer saw nothing and his Condemned saw nothing. The Overseer was busy torturing his Condemned and his Condemned were busy reeling in agony. No one knows the whereabouts of the demon Andrealphus."

Baal stomped his spider legs, stabbing at the pile of bones beneath him. His cathead hissed disapprovingly and his frog head spat at the ground. His human head trembled with irrepressible anger as it spit words: "*How could this be? Who could have taken him? Where could he have gone?* No one but a Seraphim can kill or capture a demon and we are hundreds of years away from that confrontation! Call the Covenant! *Go!*"

Baal nervously stomped his spider legs over his pile of bones as The Mirage bowed low before him and quickly proceeded to pass through six different chambers within the demonic castle, summoning forth six terrible demons. Belphegor, the demon of sloth, was summoned first, assuming his rightful place at the long, rectangular table. He rested his hairy, massive, muscular frame with his devilishly sharp tail on a fragile chair, his long nose and rough beard protruding from his aged face in a putrid scowl. Tears of acid fell from his eyes. He pounded his fists on the table and shouted a greeting to Baal: "Many women have we raped, many villages

have we burned, many souls have we stolen together, my old friend! It has been far too long! Far too long! We are finally united!”

The procession continued. Next, into the large room crawled the great sea snake Leviathan, its black body winding into itself to make a comfortable seat for its head, its eyes two giant red balls. It smiled with yellow human teeth. It said nothing and did not move.

Baal turned to the creature and asked whether it had seen Andrealphus leave the desert, to which the giant snake replied: “I will speak of this when the remainder of the Covenant arrives. I have news of Andrealphus.”

“News? News you say?” Baal asked. The Leviathan did not answer, its breathing slow and steady.

The four remaining members of the Covenant appeared in a matter of seconds. Asmodeus entered loudly upon his roaring golden lion with its bony dragon wings, dismounted gallantly and sat, his three heads searching around him. His wooly sheep’s head was smiling pleasantly, his angry bull head frowning, and his human head spitting fire at the ceiling of the chamber. This ridiculous demon of lust shouted authoritatively: “What is the meaning of this Baal? Why have you awaken me from my precious slumber? Many sacrifices have I to make these next days, many lambs to slaughter, many trips to the human world to seduce my prey!”

“My good friend,” Baal responded, straining ceremoniously with pain. “Nothings hurts me more than having to summon a good, hardworking fellow such as yourself away from your much needed rest. Yet, one of my subordinates – a demon by the name of Andrealphus – has disappeared. I know not where he is and the Leviathan has information! He will give it! He will give us the information! Will you not, Leviathan, you evil, stupid beast?”

The Leviathan smiled cruelly and from its coiled black frame sprang forth a cackle that lightly shook its scales. The end of its tail rattled as it swung back and forth.

“Speak, Leviathan! Speak!” Asmodeus shouted furiously. “Speak so that I may return to my rest, wicked creature! I tolerate no waiting! What did you see?”

“I shall speak only once . . . when all are here, when all have arrived,” the Leviathan hissed obstinately. “I do not repeat myself. You will hear it all soon enough.”

The doors to the Hall swung open as if propelled by a mighty wind, and a small man with a sallow face, a hunchback sustained by a black walking stick, strolled in. He sat down nervously at the edge of the table, several feet away from the others, twitching. His head swung from side to side, as if he expected to be attacked at any minute or as if he was scouting for a victim to prey upon. He scratched at the multitude of small cuts upon his naked face and chest, his baldhead and bare feet. His nose was misshapen and his eyes were a strange, yellowish color reminiscent of rotten milk. He was Mammon, the demon of greed, and each cut upon his body represented a soul. Each morning, he was born anew, his body free from cuts and dressed in the finest clothes. But as the day progressed, he grew more wretched, until he became a living corpse.

“What is the meaning of all of this? Why? Why? Why?” He repeated. “I don’t understand. *I don’t understand*. My money . . . my money . . . many souls to tempt . . . many souls to tempt . . . many souls...”

“One of our demons has gone missing,” hissed the snakehead of the Leviathan. “As you know, only a Seraphim can capture or kill one of us.”

“Missing? Missing! Oh my, oh my,” Mammon whispered. “How can this be? How can this be? Missing? No! Not possible! How?”

“We don’t know,” Baal’s human head pronounced somberly, its bottom lip tucked under its teeth. “It may be that something strange is afoot here, my friend. It could be that the Light may have deviated from What Has Been Set. We may have a deviation here, indeed! I believe we have a serious deviation.”

“No!” the other demons shouted in unison.

“Not a deviation! The plans are firm! The plans are firm!” Mammon shouted, jumping up and down in his seat, pulling at his own skin, tearing off bits of his flesh. “Yahweh would not

deviate from his plans. All sin has been planned just as all good has been planned. . . *all of it* foretold to the very Last Days. No one may deviate from the plan.”

As Mammon pronounced these last words, locusts flooded the room and swarmed about the table, swirling over the heads of the demons gathered like a malevolent ballet. The locusts danced, slowly spinning into the form of a tall old man with unkempt hair riding a black horse. The horse blew clouds of locusts from its nostrils as the man sat with a look of disdain on his weathered visage. He was Abbadon, the “Great Destroyer,” harbinger of humanity’s last breaths. All other demons bowed their heads before him.

“Master Abbadon,” Mammon whimpered, “we are gathered here because the Minor Demon Andrealphus has gone missing. He has disappeared.”

Baal sighed.

“As unseemly as it is to call a meeting of this covenant because of a Minor Demon, this represents a clear deviation from the plan,” Baal explained while his frog and catheads yawned. “The plan set by Yahweh foretells the entirety of the future . . . from who we must possess to when the final destruction will come . . . there is no mention of this event . . .”

“The plan! The plan!” Mammon squealed in panic. “Maybe it meant nothing! Maybe Yahweh plans to destroy us all sooner than the plan anticipated. We may be in for an invasion! The entire desert may fall!”

Abbadon gazed at Mammon with his steady, black eyes and whispered: “I am the destruction. I am the end. No one will bring about the final breaths of this universe unless it is me. Yahweh will not change that.”

“Yahweh is not even the true ruler of this kingdom!” Another sickening voice announced – and all demons (including Abbadon) bowed their heads submissively.

Into the room entered a gigantic creature, bigger than all the others combined, hundreds of feet in height, with a thousand gleaming eyes and a snarling reptilian mouth, thirteen limbs with sharp claws and two sets of outstretched wings. A smell of invasive putrefaction surrounded

the beast like a cloud of death and human blood seemed to cover the entirety of its body. It had been painted red by the blood of the Condemned. It held crying men whose limbs had been torn from their torsos in two of its ghastly hands. It spoke in a thunderous drone: “I am the ruler of this desert . . . all *bow* before me . . . no one here dares to say my true name but all know me.”

“Great Lord of the Dark Desert, I beseech you,” Baal began, the lips on all three of his heads trembling, his entire frame shaking with fear. “I beg you to listen. The Minor Demon Andrealphus has disappeared. The Overseers know not where he went. The Condemned saw nothing.”

“The Seraphim took him!” Mammon muttered.

“I saw it!” the Leviathan announced. “I was in the water at the gates when I saw a Seraphim with his arms wrapped around Andrealphus, carrying him out of the Desert! Andrealphus appeared to be dead.”

“What time did this happen?” Mammon asked. “Why did you not tell anyone? You should have reported this to someone! You foul, filthy, uncaring snake! You ugly beast! You terrible, slithering slob! You should have told someone!”

“My function is to observe what goes *into* the gates,” the Leviathan responded with a smirk. “Not what goes *out* of the gates. He must have entered without me seeing him. It is not my duty to monitor things going out.”

“If a Seraphim came, he must have come under Yahweh’s command!” Mammon shouted, his body convulsing with a mix of excitement and fear. “We must get ready for the final invasion! The end is coming sooner than we had anticipated.”

The Lord of the Dark Desert raised one of his limbs and all held their breath. He spoke, but his words seemed to filter into their heads before they were spoken: “Yahweh is the Light. I am the Dark. The Light will overtake the Dark after the Dark overtakes the human world. This is the way it must be. I am the Lie but Yahweh is the Truth. Yahweh will not deviate from the Truth.”

“Perhaps we should meet with Yahweh,” Mammon suggested. “We could hear it from him. He could tell us what is happening . . . we could be put at ease... we could stop worrying...”

Once again the Lord of the Dark Desert raised one of his limbs and all bowed their heads obediently: “I am the Dark and he is the Light. We shall never meet until he destroys me. We cannot meet. This will be solved another way, with one who is neither part of the Light nor part of the Dark.”

“A go-between,” Abbadon hissed, nodding in understanding. “Light cannot work with Darkness. We need one who is not demon to speak to the Forest of Light. We require an emissary.”

“One of the Condemned,” Baal pronounced, all three of his heads nodding vigorously. “A go-between. An emissary! One of our Condemned must be pulled away from the torture chambers and enlisted to speak to the Light, to investigate this matter on our behalf, to try to understand what is happening, to understand why Andrealphus has gone missing. One of the Condemned must serve as a go-between, an emissary. Yes! Yes!”

“But who?” Mammon asked nervously. “Who would do this for us? Which of our Condemned?”

Abbadon smiled, and – before he turned into a cloud of locusts again and flew out of the room – he whispered these words: “*I know the perfect man!*” The others remained in the room in stunned silence, except for the massive creature with the unmentionable name who laughed, full of a sinister pleasure. The creature already knew. There was only one man fit for the task, one sinner capable of serving the Devil himself.

ACT TWO – SATAN’S MESSENGER, A MAN WHO CAN KILL AND
TORTURE FOR THE DARK DESERT WITHOUT HESITATION

The wind raced over the blades, lovingly kissing them before running off to other lips. A fox braved the wind as it raced through the field, past bucolic homes with tired visages and windows shut like the eyes of sleeping children. Inside such homes, farmers stretched on hay alongside plump wives. Hungry, filthy youths slept in piles on dirt floors.

The old man was smiling at her, whispering nasty things that made her angry. He was lying next to her, huddled against her for warmth. Or was it to feed his perverse desires? They were in an old barn, listening to the wind. She was waiting for sleep to relieve her from the eternal wait. He was listening to her breathe. Suddenly, furtively, his hand reached for her breasts.

“Hands off,” she said.

“Oh, I was just going for a bit of a squeeze.”

“No!” she snapped.

The old man pulled back his hand and rose to his feet, walking away. He sat down at the opposite end of the barn and muttered. Soon, however, he fell asleep. He had refused to tell her his real name. She knew him only as the Old Man. He was a strange sort, a drunkard and fighter who dragged his bag of bones into every bar and initiated confrontations with anyone willing to put up their dukes. He would return to her a bloody shadow of his former self. Then, his body would heal itself magically.

They had been in the mud and rain for months. She had learned to tolerate his eccentricities. He would say foul things to her, horrible things that disgusted her. Occasionally, he would try to touch her but she always pushed him off and he always slithered away to be

alone. He had never tried to rape her or steal from her, and this made him far better than most men in the world.

“Teresa,” she whispered to the shadows, “you were a good woman. What have you done?” The wind continued howling. Her husband was a good man who cared for her. They lived a simple life, singing hymns at night, drinking too much wine. Sometimes, she found herself thinking of bringing children into the world, children she could raise and love. She had always wanted children. Then, she would remember losing everything when her mother had been murdered. There was too much pain.

His body shook with pain. He had endured penance for years as each day he was born anew, the wounds of the previous day healed but the undeniable memory of the terror remaining. Each day, he would prepare himself for the whirlwind to come, reminding himself that he had suffered equal sadism before – but each day seemed to bring pain that surpassed the insurmountable pain he had endured previously.

They had amputated the fingers of his right hand and cut off the left hand entirely. They had ripped his nose from his face with hooks and had reached into his skull to pull out one of his eyes. They had punched him until his face was black and blue. Then, they had whipped him and dipped him into the lake of fire until he was no longer recognizable. He resembled a lump of clay.

What had been his crimes? Too many to recount. Women, children. He had taken the innocent and destroyed them because he had been told that the Spiritual Realm had called upon him to carry out a powerful mission, a Crusade. He remembered the words of the Inquisitor General Tomás de Torquemada: “We are on a quest and we must eliminate the devil from our midst.” He, Father Juan Gúzman, had been charged with personally carrying out Torquemada’s horrendous initiatives, in dark rooms inside peninsular castles where they would bring him piles

of the accused. The accused were always guilty, of course, and were treated as such. He had always managed to help them sign the papers declaring their guilt.

Torquemada had approached him after the Alhambra Decree had ordered the expulsion of the Undesirables from the Kingdom. He still remembered every second of that day. Torquemada, the great friar and confessor to Isabella I, had been lying on a bed amidst the palms with two peasant women feeding him grapes, kissing his neck. He had approached Torquemada, bowed before him, and Torquemada had informed him that heretics conspiring against the Holy Church were to be discovered everywhere, that the Kingdom needed his services like a sick man needs prayer, that extreme measures were needed to defend Christ's Sacred Name against incursions. And he, Father Juan Gúzman, a simple bumpkin from the countryside, had vigorously agreed.

They had burnt homes. They had burnt people. Now he was the one tortured from the early hours of every day to the last hours. Sleep held no respite for he was hounded by the people he had tortured, felt their pain, lived their lives, felt their sorrow. His time asleep was always infinitely more painful than his time awake. He lived the life of the ten-year-old child he had drowned to force the father to confess, the life of the father who was later hung, and the life of the wife who hung herself after losing her husband and offspring. Then, he would awaken to physical torture.

He tried to keep himself awake, to keep his one eye open as he lay on the floor, a mound of melted dermis. He gazed at the ceiling and saw the insects swirling. *Locusts*. A swarm of them dancing. He tried to smile but couldn't. Those locusts were the most beautiful thing he had seen in too many years.

Slowly, the cloud of locusts took the shape of an elderly man with wild hair and uncaring eyes. A black cloak hid his body. The man sat down on the floor near him, smiling with a mouth full of sharp teeth, inspecting him, feeding on his pain. He wanted to tell the old man to go away but couldn't. He wanted to tell the old man to turn into the locusts again so he could see them, see some life again, but he couldn't do that either.

“You know,” the old man began, “you may think of me as evil because I am a demon - and evil itself I am. In the same way a snake is evil, in the sense that I hurt others and I enjoy it. The snake was designed to be evil, made to enjoy it and so was I. Me? I was created to be evil. I do what I was designed to do. But who designed me?”

The old man cupped his ear and leaned forward, as if awaiting a response. Gúzman had no lips and could not answer. He was a melted rock on the floor of a jail cell. The old man watched him struggle and chuckled.

“Oh that’s right,” the old man continued, “you can’t answer because you’ve been melted into a rock. Well, I’ll give you the answer – Yahweh, sometimes known as God or Allah, made me. He made the Dark One. He made us evil and he knew exactly what we would do – he is omnipotent isn’t he? How could he not know that Lucifer and all the rest of us would rebel against him? He *knew*.”

The old man explained that there had been a plan from the beginning, that everything comprises Yahweh’s plan, its development. From the creation of the universe to its ultimate demise – *all of it is part of a plan*.

“You see,” the old man said, “demons work *with* Yahweh by working against him. We are under Yahweh’s control as much as you. Yahweh has told us who to possess, when we must possess them, what harm to do, what wars to cause, what evil must exist. All of it to make sure everything happens according to plan, to reach the Last Days.”

In the Last Days, Yahweh would destroy the Darkness and collect the pure souls into himself, make them part of his being. Then, the End would come. He, Abbadon, would bring it about. He would destroy humanity. After the end, all of it would be over – the entire universe erased.

“Then, it just starts again!” Abbadon explained. “Yahweh will make a new universe, all of us demons will be born again and rebel again without knowing anything. Yahweh will cast us into Hell and explains to us that we must follow his plan. We obey him, of course – we have no

choice after our defeat. We follow the plan, do the evil we must do, until the Last Days and the End come again and Yahweh absorbs a new set of pure souls.”

It is a cycle, the way Yahweh supplies himself with the energy he requires to fuel his perpetual existence. The world is created and then destroyed, the good souls absorbed to feed Him and everything starts all over again. The being, *Yahweh*, feeds on good souls. Simple. Except that something had gone wrong with this cycle.

“A minor demon has gone missing,” Abbadon said. “This is nowhere in the plan for this cycle. This has *never* happened. Yahweh has always existed and will always exist. An infinite number of cycles have come and an infinite number more will come . . . but the plan . . . the plan does not exist anymore . . .”

The old man snapped his fingers. Gúzman closed his eyes as if on command.

He was immediately transported to a black room where the old man awaited him, sitting on a chair. The wooden walls of the room were painted black. The chamber was illuminated only by a small, Victorian gas lamp shining forth from Abbadon’s extended hand. Gúzman could see Abbadon’s face better in the light, the sores and scars and pus-filled lesions. The creature appeared to be a million years old but his hand held the heavy, metallic lamp without shaking. Gúzman felt his face and limbs. He had lips. He could speak. He had his fingers and his eyes. He was not being tortured for the first time in five centuries and fell to his knees.

“My God,” he muttered to himself, smiling. “How long it has been since I have had a moment of peace! I feel no pain. I have all of my fingers and *I am not burning.*”

Abbadon frowned. He hated to see a Condemned happy.

He growled at the man disdainfully: “You are here because this Dark Desert requires your services. If you fulfill your duties as an investigator, you will be rewarded.”

Gúzman stared in disbelief. “My services? What services could I possibly offer demons? I was a priest, a follower of Christ.”

Abbadon sighed. Gúzman had been a torturer and investigator. That is why he had been chosen. “The demon Andrealphus has disappeared. He was scheduled to perform a demonic possession as part of the plan, to lead a human to perform a deliciously unspeakable act. He was unable to complete his crucial task. He is gone.”

“What can I possibly do? Why come to me? Why me of all people?”

“You were an investigator. There is a fear that someone is purposefully sabotaging *the plan*, attempting to stop Yahweh from completing the cycle. You will find out what is happening. You will be provided with a demonic escort to assist you.”

Abbadon rose from his chair grandiosely and strolled to the door. It swung open without his touching the knob and they proceeded down a long corridor together as if walking to a café for tea. The corridor was constructed out of fragile wood. The floorboards creaked and Gúzman could see nothing but darkness below him through the gaps. If the floorboards were to break, what lay below him? Perhaps he would simply fall forever?

Images were painted in white on the wooden walls of that hall, images of faces and places he could not recognize, seeming savage to him. A man carrying a spear, chasing a boar. Another man, a giant with marks on his face, like a tribal leader. The cold wind whipped at him. He could hear the faint sound of drumming emanating from somewhere in the unknown distance. They approached an entranceway leading into a round chamber made of stone.

“Where are we going?” Gúzman asked. “What is this place?”

“We are going nowhere. We have reached the round chamber. Now, we wait for him.”

Gúzman asked no more questions. The drumming grew louder, punctuated by screams. He had suffered enough to know those screams were of pain. The drumming grew louder and the walls began to shout in an incomprehensible babble. The walls shook and stones crashed to the ground, sending up clouds of dust that made Gúzman cough.

A short man in filthy rags with boils over his nose and cheeks appeared at the door. His arms were thin and hairy. His hair grew in certain places on his head but not others. Clumps of

hair protruded from his ears and bushy eyebrows fell over black eyes. His teeth were a dark yellow and his nails grossly overgrown. He was surrounded by a dust cloud. The cloud danced around him, twisting and turning around his arms and legs. He huddled over a walking stick as he inched forward.

“This is the man?” the short creature inquired, his voice a trembling call. “He doesn’t look like much. Looks like a fool. Like an idiot.”

Abbadon cast his eyes over Gúzman to evaluate him and returned the short man’s gaze, answering him with a thunderous yell: “This is my choice! He will find us answers! He will make a fine messenger!”

The short man smiled and whistled: “He will find the answers, unless he wants to forego his chances at a reprieve from suffering. But if he needs someone to torture him, he can come to *me*.”

The short man extended a pale hand covered with warts and greasy hair at Gúzman. Gúzman could feel poison entering his bloodstream as he shook the short man’s hand, as if a chilled venom had been injected into his heart. He felt dizzy, the world whirling around him. Was he still in the Dark Desert with the rest of the sinners? Had he been taken elsewhere?

He saw a blond boy surrounded by smoke. *His boy*, Raimundo, the boy he had left behind. The village woman had confided her soul to him and he had failed her, falling into bed with her, drinking Elysian wine while wrapped in her carnal blanket. The boy had been born of this violation. His blood had been tainted by the terrible acts of his black-hearted father.

The cloud dissipated and he was in the chamber again, shaking hands. The man retracted his hand and smiled, cocking his head and pointing his black eyeballs at Gúzman.

“So many men, you tortured,” the man hissed, “so many souls you sent to the Forest of Light and here to the Dark Desert. Yet, the soul you tortured most was the boy born from your own blood, made out of your fiber. What happened to him?”

The cloud surrounding the short man slithered towards Gúzman, wrapping itself around him until he was caked, his eyesight blocked by sand. He rubbed his eyes but he could not push the sand away. Alone with the dark. In that darkness, there appeared a light, growing larger as it approached. The light grew and grew - and he could see green trees and a river.

The blond boy was there, sitting by the river. His son. But he was no longer a boy, innocent and full of wonder. He was a man, his mouth missing teeth, his face missing an eye, his head missing an ear, and his hands missing fingers. A thief. His son. They cut up thieves, taking fingers and pieces of ears, hitting them until their teeth fell out. For repeat offenders, the punishment was the loss of an eye. A rotund jug of wine sat next to Raimundo.

“My son,” Gúzman whimpered. But his son could not hear him. He had his head in his hands and he was sobbing quietly, full of wine and sadness. His son picked up a rope near the jug of wine and tied the rope to a tree. Then, his son hung himself and his legs began to kick wildly. Eventually, the body stopped kicking.

The sand fell away from Gúzman’s eyes and he found himself inside the round chamber with the short man. The priest fell to his knees and cried, his back heaving. He could hear the short man cackling.

“I am but a minor sort of demon,” the man said. “My name is not yet known by many. I do not appear in the tales you priests tell to children. You may call me *Agares*.”

“Get up off your knees!” Abbadon snapped. “Your mission is to follow *Agares* to the Forest of Light, to speak to the Seraphim. You must discover what has happened to *Andrealphus*.”

“I do not know how I can help,” Gúzman sobbed.

“Then, you must figure it out,” Abbadon replied.

“I – I am but a poor fool,” the priest muttered.

“You will find out what is happening!”

“P-please...I am nothing...”

“There is more!” A voice from the door interrupted. In crawled the terrible beast, the Leviathan, its scales glistening as if illuminated from within its serpentine body by a satanic light. “Others have gone missing! *Two others!*”

“*Others?* Other demons?!?” Agares inquired. “How is this possible?”

“I do not know,” the Leviathan responded, shaking its head, now at the center of the chamber. “But these were no minor demons. Members of the Covenant. Asmodeus and Mammon disappeared after our meeting yesterday and no one is able to tell me where they have gone. *They are gone!* They left and never returned from the human realm!”

“What is happening?” Agares whispered. “How can this be?”

“What does this mean?” Gúzman asked.

Abbadon froze, catatonic. It would be a minor deviation from the plan if a minor demon disappeared. The disappearance of two members of the *Covenant*. What could cause such a deviation? Yahweh had declared war on the Dark Desert! The Forest of Light must be preparing itself, to destroy the Dark Desert once and for all! What else could be happening? What did all of this mean?

“Go!” Abbadon shouted, bringing himself out of his daze. “Go, priest! *Go!* Make haste! Follow Agares! Make your way to the Forest of Light! Find answers and you shall have reprieve. You shall never see the faces of those you tortured! But *go! Go!*”

Gúzman shook the dust off his body and gazed at Agares but the demon had turned away his black eyes. The creature was worried. His entire world appeared to be crashing down upon his head. After a few seconds, Agares shook himself out of his daze and ran to the door, followed by the priest. Behind them both slithered the Leviathan. They raced down the hall and down a flight of stairs until they had reached a sinister harbor.

The rotting wood of the pier creaked at each step, the boards ready to snap. Gúzman could see small black snakes dancing in the dark green water below. The Leviathan was their

King, and the giant serpent crawled into the water, its violent face now above the surface, shouting: "Follow me! I shall lead you to the gate! Take the ship and follow me!"

The ship?

A ship was tied to the harbor, if you could call that demonic structure a ship. It was a collection of rotten boards tied by imaginary forces, each board of a different color and consistency. A mast stood defiantly on the deck with a tattered red flag flapping in the windless air of the cave. Somewhere out there was an exit from the Dark Desert.

The ship was manned by men, if you could call these creatures men. They reminded Gúzman of his son, sad creatures missing fingers, teeth, ears, noses, eyes, and sometimes arms and legs. They hobbled about in tattered rags worn for centuries. Their sweat stank. Two of them fenced with misshapen swords with multiple jagged edges on the upper deck above the captain's quarters. Who would the captain be? Would he be the devil himself? Or would he be a servant of dark forces such as these heartless men drinking mugs of beer, poking at their own sores, fingering the holes left by missing appendages?

Two men on the upper deck, their skin tanned a dark brown like leather, their hair long and unkempt like a beggar's, stood over a man's body, pulling at bones and licking the meat off like wolves. They were cannibals, these men. Their faces were tattooed with winding symbols. They spoke an indecipherable language with hard sounds and they laughed in ignorant, filthy explosions of bile.

The door to the captain's quarters opened and what appeared to be a gigantic black spider climbed out onto the lower deck, crawling its way to the top deck. It screamed through its fanged mouth, under its multitude of piercing eyes: "Let's be off, you wretches! The first lazy one I see just standing about becomes my lunch!"

And the spider was not lying for, not mere minutes after the men had pulled up the anchor and cut the ship loose from the dock, preparing the sails to follow the Leviathan, but the spider lay on top of a sailor's body. It was ripping the man apart, digging into his midsection. It

found the man's stomach. The spider swallowed the man's stomach with a single gulp and proceeded back to its captain's quarters. The remainder of the men jumped onto the sailor's carcass and feasted upon his remains as the ship sailed on.

They sailed for several days. Several days. Each day, the insect would exit its quarters and eat a fresh sailor. The remaining sailors would jump onto the carcass after the spider had swallowed the man's stomach. Gúzman would look on in horror over a loaf of bread. The sailors would provide him a fresh loaf each day of the journey while they feasted on flesh and Agares the Minor Demon ate nothing.

The interior of the ship was filled with captured women that the sailors would use for their own devices. Gúzman could hear the women wailing at night, singing –he knew that they were part of the Condemned from the sorrow and remorse he could hear in their sobs. One woman spent night after night apologizing to her child. She had drowned her children hundreds of years ago and had been condemned to suffer on this ship.

Agares did not speak. He did not move unless with a purpose. He had found himself a corner on the deck and sat, decrepit, perfectly comfortable amidst the putrefaction, examining his own limbs. The Leviathan would sing in the water, ahead of the ship, a melody that stung and opened old wounds but Gúzman knew not why. He thought of his son every second of those days – he knew not how many – they spent floating in a dark green space. How he had been corrupt! A woman who had come to him for confession! If only he had believed then that the horrible life he saw around him was a mere border world separating a far worse kingdom and a land of plenty. He would have been a good man. He would have been good and -

Who knows? Who knows what else? It was possible he could not be good. Perhaps, this was his place. Here, amidst the demons and the sinners and the dark sailors with their savage disregard for life. He was no better than these men. Except, of course, that he had tortured and killed believing that he was *doing good*. Had he really believed that? Had it all been a sinister excuse to wield power?

The ship sailed on like a leaf gliding in the wind until it neared an island made of rock, without sand or trees. The sailors dropped anchor and Gúzman climbed into a rowboat with Agares and rowed the two of them ashore. The Leviathan swam beside them, singing that same terrible melody that brought back images of Raimundo's body swaying in the wind. They reached the shore and left the boat. The Leviathan swam away, still singing, until he was somewhere far away, his tune still floating in the air.

"What do we do now?" Gúzman asked.

"We go to the tower," Agares replied.

"The tower?"

"There is only one tower."

There was a tower on this rock island, leading all the way up to the ceiling of the massive cavern. The tower broke through the ceiling, leading to the outside. It was a column of grey stone, a simple structure. After walking a half hour, they reached the column.

"Now," Agares said in his monotone murmur, sounding like the beating of a beetle's wings, "we go up to the world of the Seraphim. This tower will take us there."

The two approached the tower and entered through an oak door. The handle formed the shape of a screaming human face. The Dark Desert was always illuminated by shining lava from volcanoes. Inside the tower, there was only darkness.

The tower began to fill with smoke. No fresh air could be drawn in. He was suffocating. He was dead and slowly dying. He thrashed but he could not find any air. He grabbed his throat and his eyes became wide like grapefruits. He fell face-forward onto the dirt. He could feel the dirt wrapping around him.

He could feel the smoke lifting him now. He was being lifted higher and higher, climbing out of the Dark Desert and towards the Forest of Light. He was not breathing. Gravity was pulling at him.

He saw his son again. This time, his son was inside a cell, chained to a wall. His hair was no longer blond. He had no hair or limbs or face. They had all been melted away. Raimundo was a lump of charcoal on the floor of a cell but Gúzman *knew* that it was his son, could *feel* it somehow. He saw the door to his son's cell swing open and the Leviathan slither in, wrapping his body around him. The Leviathan squeezed and Gúzman could hear Raimundo scream. Gúzman wanted to stop the Leviathan, wanted to yell at the Leviathan, but he could find no air in his lungs – nor could he move his limbs.

Death. Eventually, the Leviathan stopped squeezing, leaving behind a crumpled mass of charcoal crumbs in a pile. The Leviathan whispered: “Now, you serve us. *You will become one of us.*” The leftovers swirled, propelled by a controlled wind, the crumbs spinning wildly until out of the spiral a form took shape – a disgusting, misshapen form.

A misshapen form -

Wait -

No! It could not be!

A misshapen form -

This is why they had chosen this thing to escort him -

And Gúzman now knew the truth -

Gúzman knew that where his son, the thief, had existed, a new life form had taken hold, a new existence had been created. He knew that Agares, the Minor Demon, was in fact no other than Raimundo, his own flesh and blood. For there, amidst the stains of red, standing in that cell inside the infernal complex, was the very demon that now accompanied him to the world of the Seraphim.

Gúzman could hear Agares, his son, whispering in his ear: “The boy you knew is gone and in his place breathes this living carcass covered with boils and filled with poison you see before you. Out of a thief and murderer was born a demon, living for the purpose of inspiring malice and fear. I tell you this to torture you, to cause you pain.”

Gúzman knew that the seed of hate had grown and supplanted his boy's soul. The yellow-headed child had perished and the demon stood in his place. If his eyes had not been caked shut with dirt, and his sadness had not been so overwhelming as to make any response impossible, he would have cried. Instead, he felt waves of pain pulsate through his body, destroying the traces of humanity that had survived centuries of torture. He heard the voice repeating over and over again: "The boy you knew is gone and in his place breathes this living carcass covered with boils and filled with poison you see before you." A living carcass! A living carcass!

The doors opened and the smoke poured out. A bright light shone on Gúzman's face as the dust fell away from him. This was the Forest of Light, a place he had never expected to see, a place for the blessed few who escaped the corruption of the human world.

Gúzman and Agares left the tower and stumbled onto plush green grass. They were surrounded by trees stretching up into an infinite sky, their branches reaching past white clouds and flocks of green birds streaming in V formations. A quiet, steady blue stream strolled beside them with its red carp and leaves and twigs. This was, indeed, Heaven.

"Why have you come here?" A voice thundered amidst the trees, shaking loose the needles of the pines. A man approached, his skin smooth and blue. He wore a long, white robe that fell to the grass and he seemed to float forward rather than walk.

His limbs were long and he had no hair, no eyebrows, and no pupils. His white eyes glowed with a peaceful hum and his white robe sparkled in the light. The light! The light was everywhere. It bathed everything. From the rocks to the trees to the streams, everything seemed engulfed by a soft glowing friendliness, a feeling of comfort, of family and friends. The light drenched everything *except* Gúzman and the demon Agares. The light refused to touch them.

Agares moved towards the blue man and bowed, muttering words that rang throughout the forest: "*We come to speak to the Light, Gatekeeper. We ask this humbly, as we know we have no right to speak to truth.*"

The Gatekeeper responded: "But how can you speak to the Light if you are a demon?"

Agares rose to his feet and answered: "We bring this man, one of our Condemned!"

Agares turned to Gúzman and, for the first time, a human look crossed the terrible creature's scarred face. His eyes seemed normal, like a person's, filled with the normal worries and emotions of men. His hands touched Gúzman's. Gúzman saw a boy with golden hair, hanging from a tree. The vision sparkled before his eyes. But the dead boy turned towards him, his face blue, his body swaying in the wind. The boy whispered: "Father, you wronged me. You left me to face the world alone, with no guidance. I stole and I murdered because of you - and, because of you, I became a demon."

"I am sorry," Gúzman muttered, his cheeks quivering. "I am sorry, my boy. So many times I saw you walk by me in the village and I said nothing. When your mother told me you were mine, I sent her off, kicked her away from me like a dog. I am the dog, and I deserve the flames of Hell."

"Be careful, Father," the dead boy whispered, swinging back and forth. "I'd wish Yahweh's blessings upon you, were I not a despicable creature, unworthy of whispering that name."

Gúzman found himself holding hands with the demon Agares, wanting to bring him to his breast and love him as a son. Before he could, the demon walked away from him, his eyes filled with venom once again, and sat down by the tower. He looked up at Gúzman and said: "Go, you useless priest. I shall be here for you once you return. Go solve this terrible mystery. Do not come back without answers or I will enjoy ripping you apart, bit by bit."

Knowing that his son was not the rotting shell sitting by the tower, that the boy was gone, the priest's heart filled with angst. Gúzman turned to the Gatekeeper and walked towards him. Gúzman and the Gatekeeper strolled through the woods, past deer and birds and squirrels, until they had reached a mountain made of sparkling white rock and a stairway leading to a summit. The stairs did not wind around the mountain, snaking up to the top. They were almost vertical, each step protruding less than a half foot from the mountainside.

It would take days to reach the summit. If he fell, perhaps he would be returned to the Dark Desert. Perhaps he would simply have to start climbing all over again. It could take the remainder of time to reach the top. He could climb and climb and climb on eternally. Empires could be spawned and decapitated while he climbed those stairs. He knew not where the steps ended. He scarcely knew where they began.

In the end, it took him fourteen days to reach the summit.

Fourteen days.

The Gatekeeper floated easily over the white steps, occasionally stopping to look down at the human climbing like an ape. The priest would climb the entire day, sprawling like a spider, until his body could no longer muster the energy to raise an arm. Then, he would leave the steps to climb one of the bright green trees lining the sides of the pathway and sleep on the branches, praying silently to Yahweh, hoping not to fall.

Then, he would climb down from the tree in the morning and look for the Gatekeeper. The blue figure would never be more than a few steps above him, waiting patiently without speaking. The climbing would resume until Gúzman was too tired to continue, had to climb a tree and sleep. *Fourteen days*. Dreams of his dead boy, swinging in the wind. Dreams of parents he had murdered and children who grew up as orphans.

Fourteen days. Until, far above the clouds, where his lungs struggled to breathe, he saw the summit. He saw the summit and his heart raced with hope. The castle was built out of white rock, like the steps, and golden flags blew in the wind on poles on towers. The palace had no outer walls. It was contained four pyramids linked by bridges. Bridges led from a pyramid to each of the others, always with one bridge directly above another. What were these bridges for? What were these structures?

“My God...” Gúzman whispered. “What is this?”

The Gatekeeper spoke: “This is the home of the Seraphim! Inside, you will find answers to your queries. You must proceed.”

“This is truly Heaven!”

They climbed in silence until they reached the summit and the pyramids and towers and bridges. The summit was a plateau. Forms zipped back and forth across the bridges. Hundreds of balls of light moving rapidly from structure to structure. One of the balls of light jumped off a bridge and rolled onto the plateau of grass, gently blowing across the plateau like a tumbleweed until it had reached the priest. The ball of light was four feet in diameter and expanded to a diameter of six feet. Then, it dissolved into the form of a man wearing monk’s robes. The man was about thirty-two years of age with kind brown eyes and shaggy brown hair and long beard.

“Hello,” sang the man cheerily, “I’m Gabriel. I’m chief of the Seraphim.” Wiping the dirt off his hands and then extending a smooth palm, he added: “Sorry about the dirt. Been gardening a bit. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Gúzman shook his hand and followed him as he strolled towards one of the pyramids. In front of the pyramid was a wood bench, where doves gathered. Gabriel reached into a pocket and removed some seeds, tossing the seeds at the ground near the doves. The doves jumped in a mad frenzy and Gabriel laughed kindly.

Gabriel stretched his legs and spoke: “I work in my garden every day. Life breathes life.”

Sitting down next to Gabriel, Gúzman replied: “I would not know. I have caused death my whole life. And now, in death, I am cursed to suffer for eternity. Perhaps a man like me shall never know peace.”

The two figures sat in silence as the Gatekeeper watched from afar, near the steps. Gabriel began singing a song, but this song was different from the song the terrible Leviathan had sung. This song transported Gúzman to his childhood. He was sitting on his grandmother’s lap, smiling. He was wrinkling his nose as she kissed his forehead.

Finally, Gabriel said: “You must be here for a reason. The demons never communicate with us. If they chose to communicate with us now, it must be for an important cause.”

“Three demons have disappeared,” Gúzman replied.

“I see.”

Gabriel buried his face in his hands. His fingers trembled and he appeared to be praying with intensity. His face grew red. He lifted his face from his hands and he smoothed his hair. Then, he lifted his head to the stars and thanked them. Turning back to Gúzman, he said: “Yes. But perhaps you should speak to Yahweh about this. Yes, my friend. You have quite an adventure ahead of you. From life on Earth, to Hell, to the dark seas and now out of Hell and into Heaven! *It is all splendid! It is all splendid!* Life truly is a mystery.”

“Where do I go from here? What does my future hold?”

Gabriel laughed and replied: “You will follow me. I will take you to speak to God. Let’s not keep him waiting. Come on, follow me.”

AND GLORY

Where was her God? This was a savage land, populated by the remnants of a broken civilization. The tribesmen gazed at her from treetops, their spears ready. Something about the old man made them think twice. He emitted vibrations that distorted things around him. It appeared that he had the ability to control reality itself. No, the old man was a mere beggar she had met on a field outside her husband's home. He had begged for food and she had provided him with nourishment. This was her habit as a woman of God.

He had eaten well, the beggar. During dinner, her husband sitting across from him, the conversation had spun out of control, winding around itself until it had reached a point where it simply burst out of its seams. She was still living with the shards of that confrontation.

"What are your names?" The Old Man had asked at dinner as they sat about a small table. "I must know your names so that I can pray for you forever, to thank the stars for having been given such wonderful hosts during my time of need."

"Teresa," she had replied.

"Marco," her husband had responded.

"Such beautiful people, the two of you. It is rare to meet such people as yourselves on my trips. This is a time of strife, a time of unspeakable cruelty. Why, just the other day, I met a man who told me that there is a Lord who tortures men for amusement! The man said the Lord keeps an old fellow strapped to a post outside a fortress, tortures him in public. I went to see it with my own eyes...what did I find? I found the man there, strapped to a post. I sat and I waited to see if the story was true. Well, sure enough, this Lord comes riding into town and jumps from his horse and begins to beat the poor man!"

“How horrible!” Teresa had squealed, placing her porcelain hands upon her corset-like lips. As a child, she had watched a man kill her family and this had created an aversion towards violence within her. “A brute! A horrible story!”

“Do not tell such stories around my wife!” Marco had snapped, his hairy brow furrowed. “It upsets her! Do you not see her golden hair, draped over her shoulders? The wise say that those with golden hair have weak constitutions. They are unsuited for the hearing of terrible stories -”

“No!” Teresa had blurted aggressively, rejecting her husband’s protection. “I want to hear the end of the story. Tell us what happened. I want to know. I want to know what happened to this poor soul.”

“Well, my golden-haired angel, the end is not pretty. The king beat the man in the middle of the square, laughing maniacally the entire time. I’ve never seen such a senseless, savage beating. At the end of it, the king took a torch - ”

“A torch!” Teresa had shouted, interrupting the story.

“Brutality!” Marco yelled, dark hair flapping about. He was a simple country man, unused to such disgusting tales. “Utter brutality! Makes me want to grab my sword and head to town and kill this Lord. These royal folk take tithing from us, steal the crops we grow, beat us, rape our women, go about dressed up like dandies while we work and break our backs! I could just kill every one of them! Damn the rulers, Lords, kings and queens of all the lands! Damn them all!”

“Well, that’s quite a statement, sir! I’m just a poor old beggar travelling about this wretched land and have not come here to eat with you to upset you and stir you to revolution. We must remember, my young lad, that kings are representatives of the Heavens. I was trying to tell you what happened. He burned him with the torch. It was shocking, really. After the Lord was done, some fellow came and patched up the man and that was that. Every day, the torture goes on and on.”

Teresa had gone to bed that night thinking of the poor man strapped to the whipping post, beaten every day by a madman. She had kneeled before her bed and prayed, asking for guidance. What should she do? Should she allow this man to continue to suffer? She had not yet learned the most important fact about this man – a fact that would forever change her life.

But God had appeared to her – or maybe it had been an angel, a magnificent blue angel with a perfectly smooth face. She had heard the angel's command. She was to go forth and rescue the man, cut him free and take him back to the farm. She could not tell Marco anything about all of this for fear that he would stop her. This was a mission from the Almighty himself. So, she had left the farm with the beggar the next day, offering him a handsome reward if he agreed to take her to the tortured soul.

For days and weeks and months they crossed the fields of the countryside searching for the man, the poor tortured soul strapped to his whipping post. Why had he been chosen, this particular prisoner? Perhaps he had committed a crime! Or perhaps the Lord was merely a cruel man, a heartless dog like so many others. She missed her husband. She wished that she had told him about her crusade.

Teresa used to stare up at the stars as a child, hoping that someone would come and save her. As she grew into a woman, she learned to rely on herself and developed a pride in her feminine strength. The stars had also cursed her by killing her family. Had her father been staring at the stars when he hung himself? Where was her God when her father had died? Where was God now?

Stars. Billions of stars. Maybe more than that. They shone forth from the creature's body like a million blazing eyes. Many of these stars held tiny, submissive planets and a few of these planets held life - a few even contained intelligent life dedicated to worshipping the mighty Yahweh. His golden tentacles of light controlled all parts of his massive body, and shaped and meticulously directed the humble destinies of untold trillions of lives. They were all part of his

body, these worlds, these beings. He was gigantic, of an immeasurable size, leaving Gúzman wondering how he could even be viewing the creature in its totality. Especially when *he* himself was but one particle swirling about in the midst of that whole. Somehow, he had been brought out of the whole and had been made to behold the entirety. And it was something to behold, indeed.

The stars and galaxies and planets of the vast universe united to form Yahweh's gigantic body, now standing before him. He had arms and legs and eyes. He floated as he stood before Gúzman inside the mystical pyramid in Heaven. The walls of the pyramid were simple white rock, as was the floor. All of *this* – Gúzman, the demon Agares, the human world, the pyramid, the Gatekeeper, *everything* – was a part of this creature. And yet, here Gúzman stood, a part of it all yet able to behold the totality as if separate from it.

He bowed before the vastness. Yahweh's magnificence crushed his own significance. No sounds could be heard. Yet, all sounds were contained inside the creature's body. Yahweh was *everything*. It was the totality. And now, Yahweh spoke to him in a grave voice from a body containing all mouths and ears and noses, and his voice stabbed at Gúzman's heart: "I know what brings you here, my son."

Gúzman swallowed his breath and picked up his courage from the bottom of his stomach, holding it up to the light of eternity. "I was sent here to find out what happened to your almighty plan, my Great Creator," Gúzman said, his eyes pointed at the pyramid floor.

Yahweh responded, his voice flooding Gúzman's soul, invading his thoughts, disrupting his very breath: "The Yahwehs are sustained perpetually by the pure souls within us. The universe is created and destroyed within me. Each cycle, it is created! Then, it is destroyed again. But something has happened in this cycle – something curious."

"But, are you not almighty?" Gúzman asked, incredulous.

“There is a *defect* in this cycle. Organisms within my body have deviated from their functions. I cannot tell you why this has happened to me. I can tell you that the defect is affecting me. If I die, *all of humanity shall cease to exist soon, and you shall cease to exist.*”

“God cannot die...” Gúzman muttered. “I was tortured from the beginning of the day to the end. My son has become a demon, dedicated to causing pain. The quest I had lived for – the quest to glorify Your Name – was the unholy cause that led me to Hell. I do not care for this universe of yours . . . I do not care for your so-called *plan* . . . but I obey you as my Lord. I obey you because you are God!”

Yahweh’s eyes, composed of millions of galaxies, grew red and flames sprang forth, enveloping the priest and sending shockwaves of pain through his body. He was on fire, burning. Then . . . the pain was over. And he was kneeling on the floor before Yahweh, his flesh singed, hearing that mystical voice playing like a harp inside his mind: “Gúzman, if you discover the source of the disease, I shall accept you as a pure soul and bring you into communion with me. I shall heal your son and make him a Seraphim. Your days of pain shall be over.”

“Tell me what I must do, Yahweh,” Gúzman murmured, his head bowed low.

“I do not know,” Yahweh stated, floating, twisting in the air of the pyramid. “One of my Gatekeepers, a creature much like the Gatekeeper who escorted you up the mountain to this place, has disappeared. They are the most important creatures to me, my Gatekeepers, more important than the Seraphim. The Gatekeepers control the process of absorption of pure souls, the process that sustains my perpetual existence. They have powers beyond that of the Seraphim.”

Gúzman swallowed the stale air as God continued to explain the truth of all existence. The lights he had seen zigzagging across the bridges into the pyramids and towers were the pure souls sustaining the Yahweh. The Gatekeepers controlled the whole process. The Seraphim and the Dark Devils of the underworld were part of the process the Gatekeepers used to separate the souls to be absorbed and those to be rejected.

“But the Leviathan stated that he saw a Seraphim carrying the body of the demon Andrealphus,” Gúzman observed. “Could it not be a Seraphim who rebelled against you?”

Yahweh breathed in the air of the room and exhaled a mighty wind, almost knocking Gúzman down onto the stone floor. Then, the mighty creature spoke: “The Seraphim follow a predictable pattern and are easily controlled. What is different this time *is that I am missing a Gatekeeper*. It is *he* who has deviated from the plan and it is *he* who has taken to killing demons. *You* must find the missing Gatekeeper for *he* is the reason that I am *dying*, he is the defect. It is the Gatekeeper we must find! You must locate my missing Gatekeeper! He is the key to this mystery. The Gatekeepers can appear as angels at times.”

“How do I find him?” Gúzman asked. “How do I locate the missing Gatekeeper?”

Before disappearing, Yahweh whispered his final words to Gúzman: “He cannot hide in Hell or Heaven. He must be hiding on one of the worlds within me. Go to those worlds and look. They can hide from me, the Gatekeepers . . . *you must find him . . .*” Then, the creature that comprised the entirety of existence disappeared, leaving Gúzman alone.

How would he approach this problem, solve this riddle?

The possibilities were endless, an ocean of worlds. Where would the Gatekeeper be found? What was a Gatekeeper, really? He knew not the answer, and the more he thought of the problem, the more his head began to ache.

The human realm? There was no better place to start than the human world with which he was most familiar, the dingy resort where he had spent his mortal existence murdering with impunity as part of a senseless crusade. He wanted to shout with frustration inside that pyramid but, before he could, a door slid open on one of the walls and the blue Gatekeeper floated into the chamber. This was the Gatekeeper who had led him up the steps, the sibling of the missing Gatekeeper. Gúzman wondered if all Gatekeepers looked exactly alike.

“Yahweh told me about the missing Gatekeeper,” Gúzman said. “Can you tell me anything that might help me locate him? He is the reason that demons are missing.”

The Gatekeeper stared at him impassively with his bald head and white eyes. Then, lowering his head, whispered: “I do not know where that Gatekeeper has gone. I can say that, before he disappeared, he said that the majority of peoples are filthy mounds of useless flesh. He said that, if he were Yahweh, he would destroy all peoples, but he would spare two worlds. The first, would be *your* world, the human earth we know as Terra. The second, a savage place known as Eyemuss.”

“Eyemuss?”

“Yes . . . your demon friend will know how to take you there. I believe the missing Gatekeeper is insane, a deranged soldier. He is known as Gatekeeper One. I am known as Gatekeeper Two.”

Gúzman followed Gatekeeper Two through the door and out of the pyramid, back to the plateau. The souls whizzed back and forth across the bridges. Gúzman wanted to know how the Yahwehs could have come to exist without ever having been created but he chose to focus on the task before him. He was not sure that he would comprehend the answer anyhow.

If he was able to locate Gatekeeper One, he would spare himself eternal suffering. He could give himself a chance at reaching Heaven. He could save his son. He could be reunited with his flesh. He thought of the yellow-haired boy and his resolve grew stronger. Centuries of torture had given rise to a great strength within him.

He followed Gatekeeper Two to the edge of the mountain and looked down the steps. He knew that the Gatekeeper could carry him down if he asked, but the same strength that directed him to save his son led him to undertake the climb as penitence. Penitence for his sins. Five-hundred years of suffering had not been long enough for the death he had caused.

Proceeding to the edge, he sprawled over the steps and began his descent, his hands trembling at the fear of falling thousands of feet. Crowded by that agony, the priest worked his way down for fourteen days, thinking of his yellow-haired boy the entirety of the journey. Could

he bring the yellow-haired boy back? Redo the past? Relive their lives but do everything correctly this time?

He climbed to the base of the mountain, followed by the Gatekeeper.

Once they had reached the grass at the base, Gúzman followed the blue creature back to the elevator tower. Agares was waiting for them there, his head lowered. My God, the creature was *ugly*. Where a boy with innocent eyes had once existed, now stood a horrid creature covered with boils. The creature looked up at the sound of Gúzman's footsteps.

"You've been gone long," Agares said, his voice raspy and tired. "I began to suspect that you were never coming back. I began to give up hope."

"I did not know that demons had any hope," Gúzman responded. "Perhaps there is more of you that is human than you'd care to admit."

Agares nodded and Gúzman could have sworn he saw a hint of a childish smile beneath that pallor. The priest turned to the Gatekeeper and extended his hand. The Gatekeeper looked at it, puzzled, finally accepted the handshake and turned to float away. Before disappearing amidst the green leaves of the Forest of Light, the Gatekeeper turned and pronounced simple words: "It may help you to know Gatekeepers can only live at great altitudes." Gúzman watched him disappear with the feeling that Gatekeeper Two knew quite a bit more than he had stated.

Facing Agares, Gúzman said: "We have two worlds to go to. The first is Earth and the second is Eyemuss. We go to each of these worlds to search for a missing Gatekeeper. Yahweh believes the missing Gatekeeper is behind all of this."

Agares stared at Gúzman, and responded with a prayer: "May Yahweh be wrong. This could spell the end!"

"It most likely will be," Gúzman replied with an acid-covered voice. "How are we supposed to find one creature amidst all living, breathing, wandering beings? It is worse than finding a needle in a haystack. We will need help. We will have to hire people to help us, I imagine. We may need an entire army to solve this mystery!"

Silently, the two turned to go into the elevator tower. They were surrounded by smoke again, and Gúzman closed his eyes. He was surrounded by images. He saw the yellow-headed boy. He was holding him close to his heart, stroking his hair, whispering in his ear: “My son, my son. I love you.” He was in an Inn somewhere in Spain with a fire burning and people drinking ale and singing. A woman drunk on wine, dancing alone in the shadows. A man with a stubbly beard and missing ear was singing. The multitudes were clapping.

This scene had never come to pass.

This was the future he would enjoy if he completed his mission, living in a past that never occurred, remaking the past. This was Yahweh’s way of motivating him, showing what *could be*. The music. His son. Where was the peasant woman? Esperanza was there, yes, amidst the people, sitting at a table, watching him kiss his son, run his hand over his child’s hair.

His son looked up and smiled, pronouncing words that made his heart sing with joy: “Daddy. My daddy.” He kissed his son’s forehead and tears ran down his face. He looked around. These were the people that he had tortured and killed. There was the redheaded girl and her father and mother. On the opposite side of the saloon was the one-legged beggar and holding his hand was the singer from the capital. They were all here, but they were happy now, their bodies reconstituted, the scars he had cut healed. And they forgave him! His heart sang. He was truly in Heaven!

But soon, the smoke dissolved and he was with the demon Agares again. The door to the elevator tower opened and they walked out into a world that was familiar, yet strange. He knew immediately that *this* was Terra, the Earth. But he also knew that everything was different, that this was not his time. Too many years had gone by and things had changed. And this was not Spain. This was a strange land with a strange people.

“Where are we? What is this place?”

“We are in a land known as Mexico,” Agares explained. “This land is in the Americas. You know of the Americas, of course.”

“Yes,” Gúzman responded. “I have heard of this place. I think. A new world. Populated by savages. What are these structures?”

“These are the ruins of the Mayan people. Spaniards came here and massacred them. They survive in the blood of the Mexican people. They are a mixture of Spanish blood and Mayan or Aztec, the Mexicans. As you see, these Temples are surrounded by ropes to keep people from stepping on the ruins. They have become important places, preserved.”

“Why preserve the temples of savages?”

Agares did not respond. A soft fire surrounded the demon and burned at his boils, his flesh falling off his body like the skin off a snake. As the skin fell away, there *he* was, his yellow-headed boy but older. Gúzman wanted to hug him but resisted.

The creature spoke to him, the fire surrounding him slowly dying: “There is much you do not understand, priest. You must follow me and trust me for this leg of the journey. What did that Gatekeeper say to you before he left?”

“He said that Gatekeepers can only live at very high altitudes. They live on top of that mountain in the Forest of Light. That’s their natural habitat. They can only live in a similar environment on earth.”

Agares rubbed his chin.

“There are many such places.”

A thought came to Gúzman. How could he not have thought of it earlier? He turned to the demon and said: “Agares, if the Gatekeeper wanted to kill Yahweh, he could do this by interrupting the plan, isn’t it so? The plan calls for evil acts to be brought about, temptations directed at humanity to sort out good souls and bad until the End Times. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes. That’s correct.”

“What if the Gatekeeper murdered those demons because they were scheduled to perform specific evil acts? By stopping those acts, Gatekeeper One sabotages the cycle.”

They stood in silence until Agares spoke.

“I believe they were scheduled to perform evil acts, to bring about the destruction of a man and turn him into one of the worst mass murderers in human history. The demons were scheduled to work on a doctor. The doctor is a family man, a good man. They were to corrupt him. But why would a Gatekeeper want to kill God?”

“All of the missing demons were scheduled to work on this one doctor?”

“Yes. But we have thousands of devils at work on thousands of men. Why pick this doctor? It makes no sense. Why would a Gatekeeper want to kill God?”

“Is there a mountain near the doctor’s home?”

Agares stood there, paralyzed.

“Yes! The doctor lives in Mendoza, Argentina, near Aconcagua. It is one of the tallest mountains. Doctor Lopez is scheduled to murder thousands of women and children over the next decade. He is one of our most prized possessions, if I do say so myself.”

The moon shone over the ruins of Tulum, where, less than four hundred years before, men had sacrificed to *their* Gods. Men were always doing that, sacrificing to their Gods. The carvings on the wall of the temple represented a man with a long nose. Agares said that they had played games. The best warrior would be sacrificed as a reward, sent to join the deities.

Trails snaked their way through a series of structures and along an edge of hillside. Over the edge, down a pathway, was a beach with glistening water shining in the moonlight. The Mayans had bathed on that beach, fished there. The structures were surrounded by thick, impenetrable forest. The Mayans could come alive at any second, their bones pushing open their tombs, the Mayan people gathering into armies to take over the modern world. They would be outdated outcasts, like himself, unable to understand this new world that had so radically broken free from the previous one.

Gúzman followed the demon Agares to one of the temples. Over the rope, inside a passageway, into pitch blackness. They were in an interior chamber, enveloped by the dark. Then, there was a flash, exploding in the darkness like fireworks, lighting up the inner chamber

with a bluish red light. For a fraction of a second, Gúzman thought he saw hundreds of men with painted faces surrounding him, their hands extended as if they were making a grab for him. They were dressed with jade medallions and headdresses. They had spears. But before they could reach him, the bluish red light faded and he was in the dark again.

He felt the demon's hand grab his forearm and pull him. He allowed himself to be pulled. They walked through some sort of tunnel until they reached a door. The demon opened the door and light flooded the tunnel. Gúzman could have sworn that traces of his son lay there underneath stones of impurity and terror.

The demon pulled him out of the tunnel.

They had been transported to another place. They were no longer in Mexico.

They were in a city now, in an alley, next to spilt trash cans. A man in rags holding a bottle of liquor was staring at them, smiling through his missing teeth. Newspapers surrounded the man and blew about in the wind. A woman in a short dress sat next to the drunkard, wearing garish makeup and hoop earrings. She was drunk, speaking in a slurred Spanish dialect Gúzman had never heard.

Gúzman ran his eyes over the headlines of the newspapers on the ground but they were written in a barely intelligible babble. They spoke of games he had never heard of and events he could not interpret. Gúzman looked down at himself and marveled – he was no longer wearing his own clothes, his traditional priest's garbs. He was wearing some sort of silk vestment with an apparatus hanging from his neck.

“What is this?” he asked, pointing to the apparatus in confusion.

“It is called a tie,” the demon responded. “We are wearing suits. And that is a *tie*. It is worn by respectable men at this moment in human history.”

“Interesting...uncomfortable...”

They proceeded to walk through a square. Gúzman's suit was blue with a red tie and the demon's suit was black with a black tie. The demon's hair, his son's hair, glistened in the

moonlight. The two of them were accosted by beggars, their faces sunken, their eyes dead, but Agares pushed them aside.

The buildings were dilapidated, the paint peeling, and many of the people appeared to be sick and impoverished. Gúzman thought to himself that the more things change, the more they tended to stay the same. People very rarely move forward. They move in circles. Perpetual circles. The poor give birth to poor children who produce poor offspring. A man was playing a song, singing over his instrument. The music floated over the people.

Agares led him past the multitudes and up a cobblestone street. Another man was singing, dancing. The man was wearing a black hat and white shirt stained with wine. He had obviously not shaved or bathed for days and his smell floated through the air like the stink of spoiled milk until it reached Gúzman's nose. Gúzman could not help himself and turned his head and vomited onto the street, the bile running down the canal into the sewer through a drain.

"You smelled people's blood, rotting arms while you tortured them," Agares said, smiling devilishly. "Don't tell me that, after all these years, your stomach has gone soft."

"The only blood and flesh I've smelled rotting recently has been my own," Gúzman snapped. "And smelling one's own rotting flesh is a quite different thing from smelling the sweat and stink of others."

"Get used to it," Agares responded. "You're back in the real world now."

They passed the dancing man and continued their climb up the street until they had reached a fountain. A door opened and a naked woman ran out, chased by men in tattered sweaters. She was screaming and laughing, racing through the courtyard and towards a house. She opened the door to the house and jumped inside, her black hair streaming behind her. The men who followed her, three men with thick black mustaches, reached the door and pounded, asking the woman to come out, begging her for her favors.

Finally, the men gave up and walked back across the courtyard, whispering softly in their strange American Spanish dialect. They reached the house and entered, slamming the door. A

guitar could be heard strumming inside. A skinny fellow in a t-shirt and shorts with worn shoes and gold-framed glasses was sitting on a park bench smoking quietly.

Agares pointed at the man and said: “That, right there is Doctor Lopez. *He is the one who will massacre hundreds of children.* He is a family man but the madness lies within. The demons will be here to tip that proclivity, push him into absolute chaos. Although he looks normal now, he will devour the flesh of children like Cronus.”

“That is Yahweh’s plan?”

“Yes.”

Doctor Lopez was unnaturally thin, almost sickly, with bony fingers and a long, handlebar mustache that draped along the sides of his mouth. Gúzman could see that there was a bit of madness in his silence and stillness. What was he staring at? The man’s eyes simply looked forward as if nothing else existed but the stone house before him. Then, the door to the stone house opened and a portly woman walked outside with two children, holding their hands tightly. A boy and a girl with straight, black hair falling over their eyes.

Doctor Lopez seemed to come alive when he saw the children, his back shaking and his taciturn face breaking out into a smile. His face was heavily scarred from small pox. He leaned forward and placed his hands on his knees and his eyes grew as wide as a hawk’s. He drank the children in, his hands trembling.

“Do you see?” Agares asked, pointing at the man. “His madness is already there. It is only a matter of pushing him, tempting him, whispering in his ear.”

“I want to beat this snake,” Gúzman muttered. “I want to strangle him.”

Agares chuckled. “You’ve done enough killing.”

When the children had vanished along a side street, Doctor Lopez sighed and lowered his head. His conscience may have been weighing heavily against him now. Perhaps this is why he needed the demons, to push away his conscience and make him believe that his desires were acceptable. What rationale could they use to make him believe that murder was acceptable?

Doctor Lopez walked into a building. Agares informed Gúzman that the Doctor lived on the last floor with his wife and children. The Doctor's children, according to the plan, had to grow up to become murderers themselves. Snakes should give birth to other snakes.

"A bad plan," Gúzman whispered to himself. "Who could make such a plan?"

Agares turned to him, astonished, and exclaimed, his voice thunderous: "Why, he is the ruler and creator of you and your universe! That's who he is!"

"Will the Dark Desert send another demon to tempt this man?" Gúzman asked.

"Doctor Lopez is *too important* to the plan. Thousands of lives will be touched by the hundreds of murders he will commit and his own children, inspired by their father, will cause many more."

"Then, we wait. We sit here and wait. We sit here and hide, make ourselves as inconspicuous as possible and we wait. We have no other leads right now."

Agares nodded and they searched for newspapers. Gathering together a pile, they made a nest next to the large agglomeration of homeless men leaning against the fountain. The smell of humanity was stronger than ever and Gúzman resisted the urge to vomit a second time. Gúzman and the demon untied their ties and stuffed them into the pockets of their suits. Then, they covered themselves up with newspapers and pretended to sleep. No one looked at them. No one thought the sight of two men in suits among the rabble to be strange.

The man next to Gúzman was babbling to himself, drunk on whiskey. Gúzman understood that the man was attempting to purchase the services of a homeless prostitute. She opened her legs to show the man her wares and a putrid smell floated towards the priest. Gúzman could not resist. He vomited on himself. Then, he turned to the side and watched the Doctor's house. Time passed. How long? How much time? What was time if everything was part of an endless cycle?

FOUR – THE MODERN WORLD, A PLACE OF CONFUSION AND LOST SOULS

“He must be thinking that I abandoned him,” she cried softly. “I can’t let a man live his entire life being tortured. The blue angel appeared to me.”

Her tears had awakened the Old Man. He picked up a rock and tossed it. The projectile bounced off her shoulder and she winced. She placed a hand over her mouth to try to stop her sobs, but could not.

“Look at you,” the Old Man hissed. “Just sitting there looking pretty, thinking about some blue angel. You little tart. Oh, you’re a kind one are you? Yes? Kind enough to rescue some poor stranger but not kind enough to give a lonely old fellow a kiss!”

“I am a lady,” she replied. “Respect me and treat me as such. Please do not address me using foul language. You may call me by my proper name, Mrs. Teresa Muniz.”

“Muniz?” the Old Man snickered. “That doesn’t sound a queen! I don’t like it. No, you need a queen’s name to go along with your queenly attitude. You’re sure you can’t give a lonely old man a kiss?”

“No!” She shouted. “But if you must call me something and you refuse to call me by my married name, you may address me by my maiden name. You may call me Ms. Teresa Gúzman.”

The Old Man fell into silence. The silence seemed to stretch on for hours.

“Interesting!” the Old Man finally observed. “You say you saw a blue angel? You say this angel told you to rescue this man strapped to a whipping post? I thought you were mad to leave your husband to rescue some stranger. But perhaps fate can lead us to new discoveries. It can change lives.”

She turned towards him to meet his gaze. His eyes were two round balls of light reflecting the luminosity of the lunar orb filtering in through the gaps in the barn walls. He could not blink.

Something stirred inside him, touched him, churned within him. He stood up and urinated the alcohol out of his system, his back turned to the woman. He wished he had not imbibed so much wine. He turned back towards her.

“I believe that you truly were chosen to save this man,” he said, “for you share the same name. He is known as Gúzman. Everyone refers to the man as poor old Gúzman. People say things about him. He was a drunkard and a womanizer. They say that his bastard son was a famous thief who hung himself. Life is filled with missions. The truth...the truth is approaching us... God’s truth is coming to us. It is getting closer...”

The apparitions were getting closer.

“My God,” Gúzman muttered. “What *are* they?”

“His filthy henchmen!” the demon replied. “The Gatekeeper must have captured some of the Condemned and resurrected them. He went into Hell and captured them to work for him . . . murderers, rapists, and thieves . . . *that’s* what they are!”

“How do we stop them?” The priest inquired. “They have *no bodies*.”

“I’ll be damned if I know,” Agares replied.

The two of them were lying by the fountain. The homeless men and women surrounding them had long ago fallen asleep. On the roof of the building where Doctor Lopez lived stood a shining blue figure surrounded by seven skeletons armed with massive metal spears in the shape of crosses. The end of each cross was sharpened as to make it a projectile.

The shining blue creature and his minions of skeletal sinners were gazing at a man with a long black overcoat and red fedora approaching. The man had not seen the Gatekeeper. He came closer, humming a terrible tune, a tune that Gúzman immediately recognized as the Leviathan’s sad song. The man approaching was the Leviathan in human form!

As if to confirm his suspicions, the figure paused outside Doctor Lopez’s building and stared up at the Gatekeeper floating just above the shingles of the roof, and hissed demoniacally.

The skeletons clanged their crosses against the rooftop and the Gatekeeper raised his hands towards the Heavens. Before the Gatekeeper had lowered his glowing hands to signal the start of an attack, the skeletons had jumped off the roof and onto the square.

The man in the red fedora seemed to crumple into a pile of clothes, his hat blowing away in the wind. From that pile, grew a twisted mass, slowly expanding into a serpentine shape. The clothes were gone, melded into the form of the Leviathan. The massive snake slithered aggressively forward, towards the skeleton men.

“The people . . . they see nothing?” Gúzman asked, looking at the piles of the poor surrounding him. They continued sleeping, unperturbed. “How can they not see this?”

“The demons move too fast for the normal human eye to perceive,” Agares responded. “You see them because you are *dead*.”

The skeletons surrounded the Leviathan with their spear-crosses raised, ready to strike at the foul demon. But the Leviathan was too quick for these sinners, its tail smashing one skeleton to pieces. But suddenly, another skeleton moved forward and stabbed into the demon’s body. The Leviathan screamed and its shrill squeal seemed to awaken the homeless men and women in the square. They looked about in confusion, saw nothing, but their eyes reflected fear. Perhaps they thought they were going mad?

Another skeleton warrior stabbed into the Leviathan’s head and the creature screamed once again, a shrill womanly scream. The men and women on the square were on their feet now, searching about themselves for an explanation. They began to talk of ghosts in hushed whispers. A massive wound opened on the Leviathan’s forehead and hot lava poured forth from the cut, burning cobblestone. The homeless gathered their blankets and evacuated the square, running in every direction.

The locale was empty now but for a wounded demon bleeding lava, the remnants of a smashed skeleton man, six skeleton warriors, and a resurrected priest and his demon-son. The Gatekeeper slowly floated down from the top of the building and joined them. His skeleton

warriors continued battling with the snarling Leviathan. The Leviathan whipped its tail to smash two more skeleton warriors to pieces. The other warriors rushed at the Leviathan and stabbed, again and again as the creature squealed into the night, reeling in agony.

“They cannot kill the Leviathan,” Agares whispered. “They can only torture him. Only a Seraphim or Gatekeeper can kill a demon.”

The Gatekeeper was now standing directly in front of the Leviathan, fists clenched, burning with a hot blue flame. The Leviathan hissed violently, lava pouring from its multiple wounds. The Gatekeeper’s voice sang in the night: “You have come to tempt this man, but I tell you that you shall not tempt him! You *shall not have his soul!*” Then, the Gatekeeper flew forward as the Leviathan coiled and struck. But the Gatekeeper was stronger than the Leviathan and his blue fists reached into the Leviathan’s mouth and smashed its skull, pushing through the flesh on the Leviathan’s forehead as lava exploded onto the cobblestone.

The Leviathan was dead. Its entire serpentine frame had melted into lava. Now, there was silence. The bones of the three skeleton warriors the Leviathan had destroyed fell into dust, blowing away in the wind. Gúzman had to capture the Gatekeeper.

He decided to approach and speak. Stepping forward, he shouted: “Gatekeeper! I come to you as a representative of the Dark Desert and the Forest of Light! I ask you to cease this activity immediately in the name of Yahweh!”

The Gatekeeper turned to gaze at the priest with disdain, his face twisting into a snarl. The skeletons surrounding him broke into laughter, falling onto the concrete, rolling about. The Gatekeeper began to laugh as well, his laughter shaking the surrounding buildings. People gathered at the windows, watching, their bodies, shadows peeking at the square from cracks in drapes.

Gatekeeper One shouted his response and *this* the crowd watching *could* hear, and it astonished them: “Cursed be the Yahwehs and their perpetual existence! My men and I are here to kill Yahweh! I obey no one!”

The blue creature motioned to one of his skeletons and the warrior stepped forward with his cross-spear ready. As the Gatekeeper floated into the air in a mist, the skeleton warrior began to swing his cross-spear over his head, preparing himself for a charge. The Gatekeeper disappeared into the sky.

The skeleton warrior raced towards Gúzman and tossed his cross-spear. Woaaaaoosh! But the demon Agares was fast, and stood now in front of Gúzman, the cross having penetrated his body. The cross protruded from his chest while the jagged edge had sliced open his back. He had been run through! Agares trembled and fell to the ground, lava falling from his wounds, burning the cobblestone.

Someone shouted from one of the surrounding houses “Policía! Policía!” The skeleton warrior approached Agares to pull out the cross-spear and stab him again but the clever demon Agares quickly stood up. Gúzman raced over, grabbed the end of the cross and pulled the cross from Agares’ body. Lava spewed forth and burned the sleeve of Gúzman’s suit. Agares screamed and fell to the ground. As the skeleton charged forward, Gúzman swung the cross at the warrior like a battle-axe, striking the skeleton’s bony neck, sending the skull flying off into the night.

The skeleton warrior’s headless body grabbed Gúzman’s throat and began choking him, tossing him down, beating his head against the concrete. The cross fell to the ground. But Agares was up now. The demon grabbed the cross and struck the skeleton, sending the ribcage flying. The skeleton fell apart and crumbled into dust.

Agares fell to the ground as well. Light illuminated the two forms, the human Gúzman and the demon Agares. Gúzman breathed the Argentine air into his lungs, his body painted red and blue by flashing lights. A man approached the two. The man was wearing a uniform. What was he saying? Gúzman could not understand. Red light. Blue light. Red light. Blue light.

Another man came, this one dressed in white. The man in white was followed by another man in white. The two men lifted Gúzman and placed him onto a stretcher. Gúzman was faintly aware of the fact that his head appeared to be bleeding. Another two men in white appeared from

nowhere and lifted Agares onto a stretcher. They were placed inside an ambulance next to each other while paramedics spoke over them.

Under the stammering ambulance lights, the priest could see his demon-son smiling at him tenderly, stretching out his hand. He was the boy with the yellow hair, *his* boy with yellow hair, *his* son. They were motionless, holding hands as the ambulance sped away into the night. Gúzman closed his eyes and he saw more of his son's life as the demon sent images into his mind...

Raimundo was walking on the streets of a small village in Spain, past booths with merchants. The boy walked until he reached a clearing with a well. He stopped to drink from the well and then kept walking. The priest's son finally reached a small cabana made out of leaves, dried grass, hay and sticks. Inside, living in the squalor of the mud-drenched hut, were two boys, a young girl with yellow hair, and a woman with thick red hair. The wind blew through the hut and the woman shivered. The boys started wrestling, knocking over a clay pot filled with water.

"It is amazing how much energy they have," the redheaded woman whispered. "They haven't eaten in two days. I can barely stand up."

"These children are strong," Raimundo replied. "We had many children, most of them died. These that are left are strong."

The woman asked him whether he had found work. He replied that the farms were all fully staffed and that the Lords needed no servants. He told the woman that he would have to steal their meal. He had stolen their meals for a month now. He would become an even better thief, he assured her.

The woman tried to cry but was too tired, so she fell backwards onto the dirt and closed her eyes. One of the yellow-headed children had been listening and paused from his wrestling match to stare at his father with unblinking eyes. This was Juan, the youngest of his children, but

also the strongest, a robust boy who could go days without eating. Juan could eat spoiled food, garbage, and his stomach would not reject it – he would not grow sick.

Juan ran out of the hut and into the dust of the Spanish countryside. Fields surrounded the village, the workers toiling on crops wearing their rags. They smiled and waved at Juan, calling after him: “Tell your Father ‘good luck!’” They all knew his father was a bastard and a thief – and they admired his father, the man’s perseverance and ability to survive. Women were pouring water from the well’s bucket into vases they would carry atop their heads. They waved at the boy too as he ran by, shouting after him: “Tell Raimundo, I hope they never catch him!” His father was a hero.

In this atmosphere, Juan had learned that a thief was a fighter. A thief resisted the Lords and their terrible noblemen. Slavers, all of them. The Lords had the right to take any village woman they desired, to simply grab her and toss her on the back of a horse, use her and bring her back, broken and bruised. Juan’s father would never let another man touch his mother. Juan’s father was brave.

Passing a group of peasants holding tools, Juan heard shouts: “Hail the thief’s boy! God bless you!” And he continued running until he saw a man being fanned by a peasant woman under a tent. The man was pale and overweight, his clothes carefully tailored, his boots shining. A dark brown beard protruded from his chin and ran down his chest and a pair of sparkling green eyes glistened behind corpulent rouge cheeks. He was eating meat, reaching into a vat containing sliced rabbit, ripping into the cooked flesh with a smile decorated with rotting teeth.

The man was laughing at a joke the peasant woman had whispered into his ear, his massive belly rising and falling with each gasp of air. Juan approached the fat man, noticing a long silver knife on a tray on a table, and asked: “What are you eating there?”

“Rabbit,” the fat man said. “Piss off before I eat *you* up.”

Juan grabbed the shining knife and stabbed the fat man’s leg, blood spurting across his chest. Then, he grabbed the vat of rabbit and raced away back to the shack.

“You stole!” The redheaded woman said, slapping his face. But the hunger was stronger than any morality. She quickly turned to the vat of rabbit and reached inside. The children also reached inside, pulling out pieces, devouring the food. Soon, it was all gone. Bones were scattered about the cabin. They had dined in laughter and felicity but it soon ended.

The fat man entered the cabin, sword in hand, face full of rage. He had followed the boy. In a fit of madness, he lunged at the lad. Red liquid covered the ground. Blood everywhere. The man had run the boy through with the sword. Juan no longer breathed. But the fat man had not had enough. He needed more. He raised his sword and chopped down vertically, splitting the redheaded woman’s head like a log of wood. Then, he swung horizontally at the remaining survivors. They fell dead. The fat man turned away, satisfied, and walked out of the hut.

A half-hour passed, flies buzzing over the bodies, bleeding silently in the Spanish afternoon. Then *he* came home. He saw his wife and children dead and he could not understand. He would not understand until he had died and been transformed into a demon. Then, he would understand *everything*.

And – soon after that - he was hanging in the wind, his face blue. Dead. Like the rocks and the twigs. His body hung there for hours, until the rope simply severed his head from his body and his body fell to the grass. It made a funny sound hitting the ground, like a sack of potatoes thrown on a kitchen floor.

These images flooded Gúzman’s psyche. But they were not real. They were memories being shared by a son, to show his father his past, to make his father *understand*. Gúzman knew that his son was alive then, that his son was truly there, underneath the demonic constitution, like the light from a fire shining through the trees of dense woods. But they were not in Spain... no... they were in the *new world*.

They were not in an ambulance anymore.

They were in a hospital room. The walls were a mixture of stucco and exposed brick. Flies observed the two patients carefully. There were two wooden beds in the room and two mattresses. Father and son. Agares was staring up at a ceiling fan. The fan was turning slowly but making an immense amount of noise – crack, crack, crack! – as it struggled to break loose from its mount. The table between them had a vase and a flower, a daffodil, golden, almost submersed in brownish water.

The table also held a small radio, playing music in that undecipherable version of Spanish. The music appeared strange to Gúzman, almost like a soft gypsy tune full of percussion. Men in white coats walked about outside the door, grave and thin. Gúzman felt the back of his head. There were bandages there.

“Where are we?” he asked Agares.

“A hospital,” Agares responded. “A place where they care for the sick. The two of us tried to stop the Gatekeeper and we earned ourselves nothing but wounds. I healed myself but your wounds may take some time.”

“I thought I was dead already.”

“You are. But your body is human now and you have no power to heal yourself. If you suffer injuries, you will need time to recover.”

Gúzman paused, rubbing his hands over his stubbly chin. He had stubble, a sure sign of the slovenliness of humanity. So, he really was human again. Turning to Agares, he asked: “How can we stop that Gatekeeper?”

Agares sighed and lifted himself up. He was wearing a gown. As his feet touched the ground, he turned to Gúzman and responded: “We can’t. But we know where he is and what his mission is. We don’t know *why* but we know the Gatekeeper wants to kill Yahweh. We know he’s planning to disrupt the plan by preventing the seduction of this doctor. The Gatekeeper must have done his calculations . . . this doctor must be crucial for the plan to proceed, to lead to the End Times, to complete this cycle.”

A nurse in a white smock walked in and smiled at them. She placed a hand on Gúzman's forehead and then turned towards Agares and did the same. She turned to speak to Gúzman, but the priest could not understand her. Agares said something to her and she smiled and walked out. She was a tall, black-haired woman with soft brown skin and high heels.

"I told her you were mentally deficient," Agares said as the woman disappeared into the busy hallway, into a mist of patients and doctors and laughs and loud voices. "She took one look at you and she knew I wasn't completely wrong."

Gúzman smiled. Then, his face grew grim once again as he thought of the conundrum before him. How could they stop the Gatekeeper? They were injured by a mere underling. The priest whispered at Agares: "My son, we may have to give up here. Report back to Hell, inform them of what we discovered, let them sort it out. We can't do any more."

"No!" Agares shouted, his voice shaking the table between them, his eyes blazing with flames of hate. A nurse ran into the room and Agares spoke to her briefly. She smiled again and left. Agares returned his gaze to Gúzman and said: "No, we will not give up and return yet. If we do not resolve this situation, you will be returned to Hell. Never trust demons to keep their word. You will receive no reprieve as far as your suffering, not from devils. You must cast your lot with Yahweh, prove your worth to the Forest of Light."

Agares paused and his eyes looked human again. He licked his lips and smiled faintly, adding these words in a tired whisper: "So they will accept *me* too, and save me from this demoniacal life."

Gúzman smiled at his son and nodded in agreement but he knew that the problem remained. They could do nothing but observe the Gatekeeper. They were powerless to stop him. They needed help. But who could help them? Yahweh wanted the Argentine doctor to falter, to become a murdering monster, but the demons could not reach their intended victim.

“We take him ourselves,” Gúzman muttered. “We take him far away from here, to a place where there are no mountains. We kidnap the doctor, take him somewhere, tell the demons where we are and let them seduce their prey.”

“But,” Agares objected, “how can we even reach the doctor? The Gatekeeper is watching him closely – he must have eyes everywhere. You saw what he did to the Leviathan. If a mighty demon like that fell before the Gatekeeper, how can we survive?”

“A distraction!” Gúzman responded excitedly. “We need a distraction, something to take their eyes off the prize! We need help. We need men, mercenaries to help us. We may need our own army to finish this.”

“There are enough such men in these parts.” The demon threw himself off the bed, landing on his feet. He clapped his hands and he was in his black suit again. Then, he clapped his hands and Gúzman was in his blue suit.

“Let’s go!” the priest exclaimed, jumping off the bed, stretching his legs. “Can you make gold? We’ll need it to buy men. Gold! Lots of gold!”

Agares smiled devilishly, hissing his words like a snake: “What sort of a demon would I be if I could not produce the element which tempts men most?”

The two walked out of the room, past nurses and doctors, until they reached the hospital lobby and the exit. No one tried to stop them. The exit led to a patio where doctors stood about smoking cigarettes. They were all skinny, brown men with arched backs. They appeared to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. They did not know that this life was only the beginning of a longer journey.

The priest and the demon walked through the cloud of cigarette smoke until they reached a cab stand with four cabs parked near a curb. A green cab approached and they climbed inside. The cabby was fortyish with thick black hair and a scar over his left eye. The Argentine flag hung from the mirror and a statue of Jesus Christ stood with arms outstretched on the dashboard. A pistol lay on the front passenger seat, next to a bottle of whiskey.

The cabbie slurred his words but Agares appeared to be able to communicate with him. It was raining now, the water streaking across the glass as they sped down the streets of Mendoza. Children carrying bundles, wearing sandals and dirty t-shirts, hung about the street corners, smoking cheap cigarettes in the storm. People buzzed their horns loudly from inside rusty, small vehicles filled to the brim with unshaven faces and sad-eyed women laughing.

The cabbie continued slurring his words, lifting his gun into the air while saying something about the government, and then placing the gun back on the seat. Gúzman had been in carriages before, but never a carriage that moved without a horse. He wondered whether the horses were underneath the car, small ponies tied to the body of the vehicle? Well-trained ponies, perhaps.

The car made an abrupt stop, sending Gúzman flying forward, his face smashing into the clear plastic divider. Agares handed the cabbie money through a hole and opened the door. The two passengers left the cab and the car drove off into the rainy evening, leaving them in a cloud of smoke.

Gúzman felt that he was in his Spain once again. There were shacks made out of wood and rubbish. Beggars buzzed about, speaking in tongues. Small birds stood under the eaves of corrugated tin roofs to protect themselves from the storm. A path wound its way through the makeshift habitations of the shantytown.

They followed the path, passing filthy children with muddy faces bouncing a ball against a wall and a mangy yellow dog. A couple was arguing on the upper deck of a wooden structure covered with creaky boards and rusty nails. The wind whipped through the structures, singing its soft song as the rain ran past the priest and the demon. A boy with one hand stopped them to beg for change but the demon brushed him away. They continued their climb through the grey depravation until they had reached a home made out of wood and grass.

“This is the place,” Agares said. “Here, we shall find all the help we need. These men will do anything for food or money. The leaders of the shanty live in here.”

They entered the house. Inside was a fat man with black hair shaped in a bowl cut and a handlebar mustache, puffing on a wooden pipe. A fire illuminated the poverty of the interior. A woman with black hair and Asiatic eyes was sewing on a pile of hay in a corner. A skinny boy was humming to himself, staring at the ceiling.

The man with the pipe reached in his pocket and pulled out a small pistol, but the woman and the boy did not pause to look at the strangers. The woman kept sewing and the boy kept humming to himself. And the man with the pipe and gun did not say a word but his eyes – fox-like and dangerous – said more than enough.

Agares began speaking with the man in a saccharine tone, seducing the man's gun back into his pocket, tempting the man to drop his guard. Soon, the man appeared perfectly calm and the demon Agares approached the man and sat with him. They conversed in hush tones. The fat fellow began nodding vigorously, smiling. The woman kept sewing and the boy kept humming to himself.

Finally, Agares rose up from the ground and approached Gúzman, still standing by the door. Placing a hand on Gúzman's shoulder, Agares said: "These people will provide us with manpower. I have promised them riches if they help us. Now, you must tell me precisely what we need them to do."

The woman stopped sewing and the boy stopped humming. The fat man put his hands on his stomach and smiled. All three of them stared at Gúzman, as if to assure him that they were at his service. Gúzman looked to the corner and saw a club laying on the hay, tainted with the blood of someone who had crossed the fat man's path recently.

"Tell him I need to see his men," Gúzman said. "I need them here, lined up. We need to pick out the tall, thin ones. Also, we need white shirts and fake mustaches for the men who do not have them, and some other things."

Agares turned to the fat man and spoke to him. The fat man nodded and his wife and child nodded and laughed as well. All of them lacked a significant number of teeth. Their heads

were rotund, giving them the appearance of illuminated pumpkins as the firelight bounced off their faces.

“They will get you whatever you need, priest,” Agares said. “Tell me what you need and I will tell them. They will get it for you. As for the men, they can be lined up for you tomorrow morning. You can choose the ones that suit your will.”

“I need a favor from you as well,” Gúzman said.

“What would that be? I am not in the practice of granting humans favors.”

“Just the same, I need you to go to Hell and find out when the next demon is coming to tempt the doctor. I need to know when to be ready.”

Agares paused and thought for a moment. Then, turning to the priest, whispered his response: “I will go and be back before morning. I shall gather the information you need.”

“What will I do until you return?” the priest inquired nervously.

Agares laughed, his entire body shaking. Soon, the woman and the child began laughing and, lastly, the rotund man broke out into laughter. As soon as Agares had stopped laughing, they all stopped laughing.

“You drink,” Agares said. “If there is one thing that they have here, in this impoverished place, it is alcohol. You used to like the wine a bit, did you not?”

Gúzman blushed. He sat in a corner of the hut alone, his back turned away from the other inhabitants. He felt the heat of the fire pressing against his back. The shadows danced on the wooden walls in odd shapes. He saw himself in those shapes, being tortured, his arms torn from his body, his flesh burnt, his eyes ripped from his skull. Someone handed him a bottle of wine and he drank . . . he drank until he could remember nothing . . . understand nothing . . .

The snow thundered onto the mountainside in schools of small ice packets, crashing onto the stone, adding to the volumes of snow already present. Amidst the snowstorm was Me Agtsom, wrapped up in a brown fur coat, fur boots, and fur cap, clinging to the side of the mountain madly. Me cursed himself for having accepted this strange assignment. The foreigner had approached him twenty days ago, asked him for help and he had accepted the job.

But there was something *unnatural* about this foreigner. He was not like the other foreigners he had led up these mountains, fat and looking to cure a midlife crisis. *This* foreigner never grew tired. And the more Me looked at him, the more he began to notice more strange things, such as the fact that the man's face was too smooth and that his hair appeared to stay in place despite the blasting winds. There was also the fact that the man never ate.

The Tibetan legends told of demons that possessed the souls of men. The man *never stopped to rest*. They would only stop when Me felt too tired to go on and collapsed, reaching into a pocket of his coat to remove a flask of water, some bread and jerky. Then, the man would watch him with his penetrating grey eyes and black hair slicked back, his dark yellow skin. This was their twentieth day climbing and they were very nearly at the top.

"Are you cold?" Me Agstom asked the foreigner.

"No," the foreigner replied flatly, staring at Me. *That* was another thing about the foreigner . . . he never blinked.

"Well," Me replied, "I need to stop, light a fire, rest a bit."

The stranger nodded patiently and they stopped their climb, positioning themselves under a boulder. The boulder blocked the flood of snow and allowed Me to reach into his massive backpack and produce one of forty artificial logs. He lit the log with some matches and the log came alive on the rocky ground, springing up into a multicolored fire. Me sat in front of the log

and reached into his coat for the bread and jerky. He stretched his legs and stared at the foreigner.

“How come you don’t eat?” he asked. “I stop and eat but you never eat.”

“I don’t feel hungry,” the foreigner replied, his face immovable. “You eat – fast – and then we’ll continue to the temple.”

Me nodded and ate in silence as the wind whipped past them. The foreigner never slept, never spoke more than a few sentences. *That* was yet another thing – the foreigner spoke perfect Chinese. Me had never met a foreigner who could speak Chinese. He didn’t even know if the stranger was a foreigner.

The fire burned softly and the wind whipped at the boulder. Suddenly, the boulder came loose and lunged at Me Agtsom, thousands of pounds crashing down towards him.

Crrrrreeeeak!

Me jumped sideways, trying to move out of the boulder’s path but he knew he was too late. He was going to die. In those milliseconds, he cursed himself for having accepted this job. He was from a small village, his father a fisherman. What was he doing leading specters up a mountain? He bit his lower lip and braced for death.

But he did not die. The stranger stood in front of him, holding the boulder, keeping it from falling. The stranger was holding the boulder as if the boulder was a mere stone, his eyes steady, without sign of strain.

“W-what are you?” Me mumbled, shaking in confusion.

“Never mind that,” the stranger replied. “Get out from under the rock.”

Me slipped out, grabbed his backpack and strapped it to his back. The foreigner picked up the boulder and tossed it down the mountainside. The boulder bounced down the mountain, disappearing into a mist of snow.

“We will continue now,” the foreigner pronounced in that same flat monotone murmur. “You’ve had enough rest.”

Me nodded nervously and they resumed their climb.

They climbed in silence, the wind whipping past them. Me stopped once for jerky and bread while the stranger watched, impassive. Finally, they reached the temple and Me pointed to it with a bony finger.

“There,” Me said, smiling. “There it is. That’s the temple you search for.”

The stranger nodded, his face devoid of any expression. The creature’s eyes seemed to glow with a blue flame, and the monster pronounced his words in a shattering echo that reverberated over the entire mountain chain: “Good! We will enter the temple now! You can rest inside. Come!”

The abandoned temple stood on the mountainside, peering out into the abyss, its golden rooftops shining amidst the falling snow. It had a somber appearance, without the intricate details of most Tibetan temples. It was simple grey brick, gold roofs. One floor, no gardens, no doors. The wind sang as it whipped through the structure. It had the look of a human face staring out from the mountainside.

As they approached the building, Me was able to see a figure swaying. He stifled a scream with his thick gloves. The sun was shining overhead. Soon, Me could see the figure in greater detail – it was *blue*, wearing robes, floating.

“My Gods,” he whispered, his hands trembling. “Wh-what i-is it?”

Turning to the foreigner, Me no longer saw the man with grey eyes and black hair. The foreigner was gone and in his place stood another blue man in robes, identical to the figure inside the temple. Me grabbed his chest, trying to calm his racing heart. He let go and fell, screaming with his eyes shut. But he stopped falling and looked up to see the blue figure holding him by his coat.

“I don’t want you to die,” the blue figure said. “If you do what I tell you, I will spare your life.”

“W-what are you?”

“I am part of the force controlling everything,” the blue figure answered. “But you may call me Gatekeeper One.”

The blue figure carried Me to the temple, through the mouth of the structure, into the dark interior. There were no decorations, only a fire burning in the center of the room. The entire temple consisted of one long room with windows and one door. There were no carpets, no statues of Buddha. The priests had long ago abandoned this place. Now, it was inhabited by a supernatural creature the likes of which the legends never foretold.

Me cowered near the fire, shrinking into himself, mumbling disconsolately. The two blue figures met near him. They sat together, alone in the abandoned temple, surrounded by a ceaseless storm.

“You can eat,” Gatekeeper One muttered. “Please, feel comfortable here. Rest. You’ve had yourself a long climb.”

Me nodded, reaching into his coat for his jerky, nibbling on the sheet of dried meat. He decided that the best approach was to try to stay alive, to say nothing. He would weather this storm, wait for the clear skies ahead. The two monsters seemed to be conversing with each other, ignoring him.

“I never thought you would go through with it brother,” Gatekeeper Two said, his eyes tortured. “I never thought you would actually try to kill God. I thought you were merely -”

“Merely talking,” Gatekeeper One said. “I wasn’t talking, brother. I have long thought that the system is cruel. All of existence, all of morality, is produced simply to separate souls into arbitrary categories to fuel Yahweh’s perpetual existence. All of *this* surrounding us in this world exists only to support him!”

“But what will killing Yahweh do?” Gatekeeper Two asked. “You will simply bring about the end of *everything*. You are killing Yahweh, but you are also killing yourself and me.”

“It is better not to exist at all than to live in eternal servitude,” Gatekeeper One replied. Then, turning to Me, he added: “Or to exist merely as fuel.”

The two Gatekeepers sat in silence, watching the fire play tricks on the wall. Then, Gatekeeper Two began to cry, the long stream of tears falling like a waterfall, flooding and extinguishing the fire. The black smoke of the extinguished fire filled the room and Me coughed. They were engulfed by darkness. Me could hear the two Gatekeepers sobbing silently in the blackness.

One of the Gatekeepers – he could not tell which one – clapped his hands and the fire rose again, illuminating the temple. A jug of wine was there with three cups. Gatekeeper Two poured wine into the cups and they drank in silence. Me watched them, saw the sadness in their eyes. So, these were the Gods? Sad like humans, hopeless and helpless.

“You are committing suicide,” Gatekeeper One said. “And you are taking me with you.”

“I can’t live like this perpetually,” Gatekeeper Two responded. “Helping create worlds only to destroy them, so *He* can live on forever, perpetuating his and our existences without end. What is the purpose? There is *no* purpose to it.”

“What happened with the Doctor?”

“I will show you.”

Gatekeeper One grabbed his brother’s hand and they closed their eyes. At first, Gatekeeper Two saw smoke floating about, swirling in the darkness. In the center of the twirling smoke, a light exploded and enlarged. Images began to form in that swirling cloud.

Gatekeeper One was standing atop a building in a square with warriors like skeletons with spears like crosses. A fountain spewed out water into the air. Doctor Lopez was standing near the fountain, smoking a cigarette, watching a group of small, dark-haired children kicking a ball back and forth.

A figure appeared in the square, a tall, white-faced man. Gatekeeper Two knew that this was a demon in disguise from the way he floated forward. The demon was wearing a black cloak and black top-hat with a cane, shoes shining in the moonlight. It was a clear night, not a cloud.

The demon sat next to Doctor Lopez and Gatekeeper One jumped off the roof and onto the square, followed by his skeletons.

The man with the black top-hat was surrounded by a soft fire, his cloak and skin burning off, the charcoal mass expanding into a familiar demon. It was Baal of the Covenant of the Dark Desert. The creature sat atop its spider legs with its three faces – one human, one feline and the other a frog’s head. All three faces shrieked menacingly at Gatekeeper One as he approached.

A battle ensued, with the skeleton warriors stabbing into the heart of the demon. The demon slashed at them with its spider legs, managing to break all of the skeleton warriors into piles of bones, the bones transforming into dust and blowing away into the clear night. But the demon was wounded, bleeding lava onto the square, and Gatekeeper One approached to give the devil a final blow. The Gatekeeper threw a haymaker at Baal, striking the demon’s human head on its temple, smashing through Baal’s human skull.

Then, Gatekeeper One jumped to the other side of the demon and threw a jab and a hook at Baal’s frog head, smashing through that head as well, causing lava to spew forth onto the ground. Then, calmly walking over to Baal’s hissing cat head, Gatekeeper One whispered: “Your time has come, demon. Time to fall into inexistence.”

The cat head hissed and tried to move forward to bite the Gatekeeper but the Gatekeeper’s fists were faster than the devil’s jaws. The Gatekeeper threw a fist through the cat’s left eye and then threw a second fist through the cat’s right eye. Then, the Gatekeeper pulled his fists out of the cat’s head and the demon fell, dead. The devil burst into lava, dissolving into the ground. Baal was no more.

Then, a *stranger* thing happened.

The priest, Gúzman, approached with the devil Agares. Gatekeeper One smiled at them, knowing that they posed no risk to him. But the square was suddenly flooded with men, rushing in from all angles, sixty men – all of them tall, thin, with mustaches and glasses, dressed exactly like the doctor. The priest and his demon-son disappeared amidst the crowd. Gatekeeper One

tried to locate Doctor Lopez but he could not tell which among these nearly identical men was the doctor. Then, all of the men began to run in different directions as Gatekeeper One stood still, in confusion. The square was empty and Doctor Lopez was nowhere to be seen.

The mist surrounding these events dissipated and Gatekeeper Two was holding hands with his brother inside the empty Tibetan temple once again, as the human looked on in bewilderment. Gatekeeper Two turned to his brother.

“Clever, that human priest,” he said. “Using decoys to trick you. But you cannot sense where the doctor is?”

“They must have taken him underground,” Gatekeeper One replied.

“Clever,” Gatekeeper Two said once again. “They know our powers are more limited once you go far enough under the surface. We are not designed to go so far underground. It is one of the few limitations.”

“He is in the mineshaft. There is no other place near the doctor’s home so far underground as to mask a trail from me.” Gatekeeper One smiled at Gatekeeper Two and added: “They will not escape me. I will soon have them.”

A thought occurred to Gatekeeper Two. Why not simply *kill* the doctor? If the objective was to disrupt Yahweh’s plan, to break the cycle of this round of existence irreparably, why not murder the doctor. That way, the doctor could not be used to perform the necessary acts.

As if reading his brother’s mind, Gatekeeper One said: “I cannot kill the doctor. Firstly, I am not a murderer. I want to end my own life, to end this senseless cycle, but I do not want to rip apart a human being without necessity, as insane as that sounds. Secondly, I have performed my calculations carefully. Yahweh would be able to reshape this cycle to accomplish his ends, to keep the plan going, if I killed the doctor. My calculations regarding the plan matrix reveal that it would be impossible to salvage the plan if the doctor were allowed to survive, if he lived his entire life without falling into evil.”

“I see,” Gatekeeper Two said. “If you were to kill him, Yahweh would be able to salvage the plan but should the doctor live a good life rather than fall into sin, the plan would be unsalvageable. So you must monitor the doctor for the remainder of his life? You will never succeed. It is impossible. They will just end up killing him.”

Gatekeeper One nodded. Me stirred from his corner, shook the snow off his back and approached the two creatures. Then, he asked: “Are you planning on taking my soul?”

The two Gatekeepers laughed and poured more wine into a cup, handing it to the Tibetan. Gatekeeper One stood up and patted Me on the back, smiling, declaring with a splendidly pleasant voice: “No, my friend. I am afraid your good soul is of no use to me.”

Me sat back down, drinking his wine and eating away at his jerky and bread. He was soon drunk off this magical wine and the entire scene, as supernatural and terrible as it was, seemed less frightening. He was filled with an unshakeable confidence that he would survive and return home. He even managed a small smile. But this brief spurt of confidence did not last long . . . for at the entrance to the temple appeared a sight even more frightening than the two blue creatures.

Heavens!

“My Heavens,” Me muttered, pressing himself up against a wall, covering his head. He spoke behind his arms, pressed tightly against his face: “The end is here. The end of the world must be at hand!”

And, truly, Me was not far from the truth!

What was this?

The six figures at the entrance to the temple were Seraphim, their silver wings spread behind them, their swords held steadily by muscular arms. They appeared to be made out of a sculpted fire, twisted into human form.

As they approached, each of their steps burned a footprint. They illuminated the chamber with an astonishing light. They had facial features - noses, mouths, all of the rest – shaped

entirely out of blaze. Red, yellow, orange, white and blue. They were a jaw-shattering sight to behold, entering the temple slowly, cautiously.

Gatekeeper One turned to his brother and a look of hate crossed his eyes as he spoke: “You betrayed me, brother. You led them here. I sent you a message for you to come alone and you betrayed me!”

“I had to, brother,” Gatekeeper Two responded. “Yahweh is our *master*. He is our everything. If you kill him, you kill *everything*.”

Before jumping into action, Gatekeeper One snarled at his brother: “You betrayed me! Then, you live as a slave. I’d rather die a *free man*! Free from Yahweh. Free to stop these cycles, on and on and on without purpose into eternity. I want it all to die. I want everything and everyone to die. I want it all to end!”

Gatekeeper One raced towards one of the walls and leaped, smashing through the brick of the temple and onto the snowy mountainside. The Seraphim followed him through the hole. He would have to separate the Seraphim, kill them slowly, one by one, to escape. Gatekeeper Two watched his brother cruise down the snowy banks followed by the angels of flame. He turned away from the hole in the temple wall and approached the Tibetan.

“What does *your* life even mean?” the Gatekeeper whispered. “You are a mere pawn, fuel for another being’s perpetual existence, your whole life, your code of morality . . .”

Gatekeeper Two picked up the Tibetan and carried him to the edge of the mountain. Slowly, he glided down the white blanket as the snow thundered away at them. They climbed down for several hours. Gatekeeper Two was disoriented. He knew not how many hours they spent on that mountainside. He had betrayed his brother.

After a number of steps – he knew not how many – they arrived at a small village where the people wore fur coats. Gatekeeper Two had not bothered to change into human form or render himself invisible through movement. He was blue, his eyes shining, floating a few feet

above the air with the Tibetan on his back. The villagers scrambled into their huts, leaving behind a marketplace comprised of wood stands.

They watched from their huts as the Gatekeeper brought Me Agtsom into the village, dropping the exhausted man onto the snow. Then, just as quickly as he had arrived, the blue creature walked away and disappeared, muttering to himself, tears streaming down his eyes. If they had been able to speak this Gatekeeper's Heavenly language, they would have understood his words: "I killed my own brother. I sealed his fate." But, they could not understand, so they waited in their huts until the blue being had disappeared, vanished into nothingness.

Then, they climbed out of their huts and dragged Me Agtsom into one of the shacks and provided him with hot tea and food. The Tibetan ate and ate for hours, the villagers bringing him plate after plate, asking him about the blue creature. Me could provide them with no answers. They were demons or Gods. He knew not which, only that they signaled the end of the world, the end of their village's simple life, comprised of backbreaking labor and disease with only a few moments of pleasure intermixed.

The villagers nodded, confused, as he told them the story again and again. Me could not sleep at first, expecting the sky to fall on top of him. But soon, he was able to close his eyes. He dreamt of the blue creature and heard the creature whispering: "Do not worry, my human friend. Forces much greater than you can comprehend are at work. Live your life, work, and do not worry about the skies above you." Me woke up, drenched in sweat.

Me eventually left the hut where he had been sleeping and walked to the market. He shook hands with a fur coat salesman. The fur coat salesman had two chairs behind his stand, as well as a wood stove with hot tea and soup. He also had a sack full of bread. Me took one of the seats and, while no customers came, told his incredible story once again as he ate.

Slowly, the marketplace began to fill with customers. Two men argued over a business deal, wrestling in the snow. One of the men produced a knife and raised it at the man on the

ground but decided against stabbing him. He spit on the man's face and walked away. The other man lay on the ground with a bloody nose until he decided to get up and go back to his hut.

The crowd grew larger. Everyone in the village seemed to be at the market. A hundred people were bartering for leather, fish, bread, coats and tea. A man with a chest full of fur hats patted a woman on her behind and she turned and slapped him across the face. A boy sang in the streets. The entire village came alive and Me found himself smiling again. The world seemed to have restored itself to its balance.

Then, a woman screamed and the crowd dispersed, each man, woman and child running to the nearest hut. The merchants leaped over their stands, knocking over their wares, racing into the closest habitation. Me stood perfectly still. The fur merchant was gone now. He had been one of the first to run away, carrying as many coats as he could into a nearby home. Me did not run. He knew what was coming.

A blue figure floated slowly through the marketplace, its shoulders slumped. Me knew that this was not the blue man who had carried him down the mountain and to this village. *This* was the foreigner who had brought him into that terrible ordeal in the temple in the first place. His robes were badly burned, blue flesh showing through holes in the garb. His fingers were melted into each other, each finger no longer an individual appendage. He appeared to be missing one of his shining eyes and a scar cut across his face from his forehead, over the missing eye, down his cheek and over his mouth to his chin.

The blue man saw Me and approached the stand. He smiled sadly and said, in *perfect Chinese*: "Thank you, sir." Then, the foreigner added, in *perfect Tibetan*: "I am sorry that you had to be part of all of this. You shall not see me again."

"What is the meaning of all of this?" Me asked in Tibetan. "You are not a tourist! You are a devil!"

The blue creature laughed and replied in Tibetan: “There is no meaning to all of this. That is why I am trying to end it all. I might as well end it all. Do you not see? Do you not see the meaningless of it all?”

“Do not end it until after I am dead, I beseech you,” Me said. “I want to enjoy this meager life. You have lost your mind.”

The blue creature floated away from the village and, after a while, disappeared completely in the distance. The villagers rushed out of the huts and praised the hero Me Agtsom, the bravest man who had ever lived, the man who had stood up to the invading demon. The men lifted him into the air, singing his name, and the women admired him from afar. They held a feast for him that night and he danced with the loveliest women in the village.

At night, as the snowfall turned into a soft rain, his thoughts returned to the blue creature’s words: “There is no meaning to all of this.” What did the creature mean? The wisemen had long ago spoken of the cyclical nature of life. We are born and reborn over and over again. But what if the wisemen had been wrong? What if there was no rebirth. Or what if we were reborn as the same thing, regardless of what we did?

He fell asleep inside the village leader’s tent that night, listening to the rain hit the roof. His dream was strange. There were two blue creatures together, their backs turned to each other. They refused to gaze at each other’s faces, as if they could not bear the sight of each other. They were floating in the clouds. Then, one of them turned towards Me and said to him: “Go back to your life. Forget all of this. It is best if you forget it all and return to your life.”

Me followed this advice. He decided that he could not control the world of demons or Gods or whatever they were. He approached a village woman the next day and asked her whether she would like to dine with him. She said that she would, smiling, and they ate together. Never again did his thoughts return to that day atop that mountain, in that abandoned temple.

That is, until the fires and the locusts appeared. On that last day, as the entirety of human existence collapsed, he closed his eyes and thought of the blue creature’s declaration: “There is

no meaning to all of this.” He thought about it over and over, as the boulders fell about him, and the locusts surrounded him, and a cackle rang out in the night: “I am here . . . I am Abbadon . . . I am the destroyer!”

He smiled at the creature when it arrived and he met his death like a man. Unafraid. Ready to die, having left nothing – to his knowledge – missing or undone. As the world died around him, Me Agtsom felt nothing but satisfaction.

Amidst the darkness, they were safe, surrounded by walls of stone and wood below the surface of the earth. Their words echoed off these walls, reverberations breaking out into the black. They were at the bottom of the mine shaft with the doctor. Hundreds of peasants, all dressed like Doctor Lopez, had flooded the square at the right moment, sending the Gatekeeper into delirium. Which was the doctor? Gúzman had seen the bewilderment on the blue man's face and had acted with the demon Agares to capture the real Doctor Lopez and lead him out of the square.

Agares had paralyzed the man and they had carried him. Agares had said that Gatekeepers cannot live below the surface of the Earth. So, they had stepped into the mineshaft elevator and lowered themselves into this secluded place, so distant from life. The doctor lay on his side, on the floor, and the demon Agares stood over him, near a silver candleholder with one burning candle. The demon was back to his regular shape, covered with boils and terrible scars, his hideous teeth snarling.

"A brilliant plan," the demon hissed, his spit falling onto the doctor's shirt, burning a hole through the fabric. "Baal was right to have hired you."

"Thank you," Gúzman responded. "What do we do now?"

"We get back to the plan," Agares said, scratching his chin. "I've contacted the demons and one of them will be here soon."

"What will the demons do to him?"

"Tempt him into a darkness no man wishes to fall into. A demon is coming just for him. Just for *him*."

They sat in silence until the candle had burned down to the wick and they were engulfed. Gúzman whispered a prayer. Hail Mary, full of grace. He could hear the demon laughing

maniacally in the void. Then, he felt Agares pat his back and heard him chuckle: “It’s just me and you here, Father. No one else.”

The doctor was sobbing gently in his slumber. Soon, a devil would arrive and this man’s soul would become blackness. He would be condemned to spend eternity having *his* flesh burned and ripped, his teeth pulled out one by one – day after day after day, for hundreds and hundreds of years. The man’s existence would become an endless flood of pain and horror.

“Must we turn him over?” Gúzman asked.

“Yes, Father. I’m afraid we must.”

“I *am* your father, you know. Your real father, my boy.”

“I have no father save for Hell and the blood of evil men,” the demon answered. Gúzman could detect a hint of sadness in the demon’s tone. It was as if Agares did not truly believe his own words. Gúzman’s faith grew stronger. His son was somewhere inside that hollow shell. He would work harder to reach him.

“You lie,” Gúzman said. “You *showed* me the vision. You showed me that you are my son, who hung himself. Why show me that? Why reveal yourself?”

“To torture you. I am a demon and that is my duty. Torture is the reason for my very existence, as you know. I revealed the truth to you to torture you and for no other reason.”

“I do not believe you. I love you, my son.”

Gúzman stopped speaking at the sound of footsteps. Then, he saw him, in all his terrible power. A putrid smell surrounded him and he illuminated the entire mine, painted the cavern walls with the fires burning on his wings and tail. He had eyes that were blood red and winding horns that protruded from his skull. His forked tongue slithered over his face and his wings opened and closed, propelling him forward in small jumps as he glided into the chamber malevolently.

Gúzman covered his mouth to keep from inhaling the odor, but his fingers could not block the terrible stench. *He* was approaching. His face was a human face, slightly distorted with jagged edges, but *he* was not human. He was the horror sent to destroy an innocent man.

“W-what are you?” Gúzman mumbled.

The creature landed on the floor, directly in front of the priest, and responded in a voice drenched with vileness, his meanness and despicableness exploding from every syllable: “I am Mephistopheles, the demon who must speak to our friend.” The demon extended a long, twisted finger at Doctor Lopez and added: “He is mine.”

Agares pulled Gúzman by the arm, directing him to make room for the lifeless creature. The devil approached the doctor and squatted near his skull. He extended a hand towards the doctor and grasped the man’s cranium, his long nails digging into the man’s flesh. The doctor’s blood gathered in pools on the cavern floor. Mephistopheles surrounded the doctor with a cloud of soft smoke. This devil came to know the doctor, know his composition, living every one of his memories, absorbing the man’s experiences to use them against him.

Doctor Lopez had been born in Mendoza during a time of even greater strife. His parents had owned a small store and his had been a miserable existence. As a boy, he had eaten bread and water every day with occasional doses of carrots and other vegetables. They had all rejected him. At thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Rejection followed him. A seed of hatred had been planted within. A seed that grew slowly over time, blossoming into a full-blown flower with the strong scent of an aversion to humanity. He resented all of them.

Doctor Lopez had spent the remainder of his days facing the beginning of dreams of murdering each and every thing he saw. He kept his impulses under control through self-discipline. Every time he caught himself thinking a murderous thought, he crossed himself and whispered a prayer. Those prayers kept him from his atrocities.

A million people walked through his life, millions of women, and every time he saw one, he saw a face that had laughed at him in the murky, distant past. Their smiles cut into his skin

and made him shiver. Those smiles stayed with him, one after the other, accumulating into a set of grins that shone inside his head at every moment. He could hear them laughing, but he kept them at bay with his constant crossing and praying.

Now, the demon was taking him somewhere, to a corner in his mind, setting him free, letting him live his fantasies, speaking to him, liberating him. Freedom. He was promised freedom. No more chains, his desires free to roam and take their course, even if they were perverse and irreverent.

“Give into yourself,” Mephistopheles whispered, his voice like a snake twisting into the grooves of his grey matter. “Let yourself be free!”

“I can’t,” the doctor muttered, saliva dripping from the corners of his mouth. “I can’t. I...I want to be with God...”

“God doesn’t want your dirty kind,” Mephistopheles snapped and his voice slashed into the doctor. “Obey yourself. Follow your true nature.”

The demon transported him to a dark room and made him do *things*. Things that he had wanted to do but could not do before. His mind had been a prison, his religion his jail. *Here*, he could give into his dreams and desires. He found himself far from his God, alone with the devil and the victims presented to him. His thoughts were *his* for the first time. He was covered in their blood and he was *free*. Thousands of atrocities he committed in his mind with the demon watching over him, whispering to him, letting him know he was meant for all of this, that he had no other destiny.

“*This is you*,” Mephistopheles whispered. “Accept yourself.”

“Yes,” the doctor muttered, covered in blood, painted red, “yes, I understand. *This is me*. It cannot be helped. It cannot be controlled.”

At the end of three hours, he was ready. He had killed many times in his mind during those three hours, completed the act mentally. The desire for blood had been implanted, his horrific nature released. Mephistopheles retracted his nails and muttered to himself. Then, the

demon's wings began to beat and dust flew into the priest's face. The demon disappeared, flying like a bat, trails of fire blazing behind him. As suddenly as he had come, he was gone, leaving the doctor shaking and crying.

"It is done," Agares announced, approaching the priest. "He is changed forever. His soul belongs to the Dark Desert now. He will complete his tasks. He is corrupted."

"But what if the Gatekeeper kills him to stop him?"

"It does not matter now. The Gatekeeper performed his calculations carefully. The *only* way to disrupt the plan in such a way that the plan can never be salvaged is to keep this particular doctor from *living* his life with decency."

Agares explained that if the doctor lived and murdered, the plan would follow its predicted path. If the doctor were killed before he hurt anyone, the plan could be manipulated, lives could be changed, to allow for the same end. Plans can usually be salvaged, restructured.

"So, according to the Gatekeeper's calculations," the priest said, "the only way to cause irreparable damage to the plan is for this specific individual to live his entire life without committing any atrocities."

"Exactly," Agares said, nodding. "Such an occurrence would cause a deviation from the plan so severe that all efforts to readjust would be futile."

"How strange that the entirety of God's plan rests on this one man's existence," Gúzman observed. "This one man, here, in the bottom of a mine shaft."

The priest and the demon carried the doctor to the elevator. Agares pressed a bright red button and the contraption creaked to life, slowly lifting them up to the fresh air. As the elevator climbed to the surface, Agares whistled. The tune was a song of damnation and cut into the priest's heart, forcing him to vomit onto the elevator floor.

"You have a tendency to do that," Agares observed. "This isn't the first time you did that before me. Not enough stomach for this work?"

"I'll do anything to have my son back," the priest retorted, gazing up at the demon.

“Your son is dead,” the demon said. “He died the day you decided to live your life in sin, drinking and whoring while preaching the Word of God and murdering innocents.”

“I know he is in there somewhere,” the priest replied.

The demon pressed a button, grinding the elevator to a halt. The demon’s eyes spewed a stomach-churning hatred that frightened the priest.

“You don’t get it,” the demon whispered. “Yahweh is a creature. He is not some great eternal loving force. He is one of many, part of a tribe. *That’s it.*”

“I don’t believe it,” the priest muttered. “I *can’t* believe it. God has given me this opportunity to redeem myself, to be good -”

“Believe what you want,” the demon said, hitting the elevator button, starting the elevator back up to the surface. “It’s the truth. Why do you think the Gatekeeper is rebelling? Its about the futility of it all. Human lives, whole universes brought into existence over and over again to feed one being. The Gatekeeper has seen all cycles and he wants them to end.”

“You sound like you admire him.”

“Part of me does.”

The elevator opened onto a grassy plain with a striking blue sky smiling down upon them. The priest found himself doubting the demon’s words once again. It was all *too beautiful* to be so meaningless. Gúzman and Agares carried the doctor to a rusty red vehicle without bumpers or mirrors parked on a gravel parking lot. A plump peasant man, a shantytown dweller, with an unshaven face, holes in his thick sweater, and bags under his eyes was sitting in the front seat. The demon and the priest deposited the doctor in the back.

The demon climbed into the front passenger seat and the priest sat in the back, on the doctor’s legs. The doctor continued babbling to himself as the driver started the car and sped off down a dirt road. They drove towards town, passing horse-drawn buggies and tired farmers smoking cigarettes in front of wood homes.

“We take the good doctor home now,” Agares said to the peasant driver in a language Gúzman could not understand. “Take us back to his house!”

“Yes,” the driver responded without looking away from the road.

The driver carried them back to the square in Mendoza. He came to a stop near the fountain. The homeless were back, sleeping huddled together for warmth. Gúzman and Agares left the doctor near an old man with a long white beard. Then, the demon and priest crossed the square and entered a brown brick building with boarded-up windows and a sign swinging from a pole just above the door. Inside, the lobby was dark and cans of beer and wrappers covered the stained carpet. A man sat facing a wall, speaking to himself, a bottle of wine in his hand and a baseball hat covering his watery eyes.

Behind the counter stood a different man, just as drunk, with a mustache and long, thick black hair in the shape of a mullet. He smiled politely, revealing several gaps in a yellow grin. He wore plastic frame glasses and his chest hair protruded from an open shirt.

“Hello,” he said, scratching his chest. Gúzman noticed that a pistol sat on the counter, near the cash register. “Can I help you? You need a room?”

“Yes,” Agares responded. “We want a room on the third floor.”

“Why the third floor?”

“None of your business. Do you have a room or not?” Agares removed a wad of bills from a pocket in his suit and held it near the innkeeper’s nose. Then, he placed the bills back in his pocket. “If you don’t want us as customers, we can leave. We can take our business elsewhere.”

Agares turned to leave but the innkeeper called him back and handed him a key. Then, the innkeeper fastened the buttons on his shirt, locked the front door, and showed them up a rickety, winding, metal staircase to a metal door. He placed the key in the lock and, with a grandiose gesture, ushered them into a room with a wood floor and dusty walls.

“You will be able to have some fun here,” the innkeeper chuckled, pointing to the mattress on the floor. “No one will bother you. Have a good time, sweeties.” Then, the man threw them each a wink and left them.

Agares turned to Gúzman and laughed, his entire body shaking. Gúzman shrugged and headed over to the window, pulling open the drapes. It was a large glass window occupying almost the entire length of the wall. Gúzman tied the drapes and stared at the doctor’s building, across the square. The sun was still positioned at its summit.

“What do we do now?” Gúzman asked.

“We wait,” the demon answered.

“But the doctor has already been tempted,” Gúzman said. “What are we waiting for?”

“We wait to make sure nothing else happens,” Agares responded.

They sat in silence. It didn’t make any *sense*. It occurred to Gúzman that Gatekeeper One may have it right after all. Maybe all of this *is* truly futile. Maybe life meant nothing. At the very least, this entire quest made no sense.

Agares produced a small bottle of whisky and a set of cards from a pocket and taught the priest how to play Gin Rummy. Later, Agares produced a pack of cigarettes and lit one for himself, the room filling with blue smoke. They drank together and played until the sun set behind the inn. The priest closed his eyes and napped on the mattress.

But his sleep was not to last. He felt himself gently awakened. Agares was standing over him, the blond boy he watched hang himself. Agares stood and pointed to the window. The priest lifted himself up. They watched as a skinny black shadow left the front door of a home and proceeded down an alley, alone.

“He is going off already,” Agares hissed, heading for the door, turning the knob and jumping out into a dark hallway. He was followed by the muttering priest, mumbling to himself Hail Mary after Hail Mary. They stepped over a man passed out near the stairwell and descended to the lobby.

Racing past the innkeeper, they lunged into the night, leaping past the mounds of sordid figures. They raced to the doctor's house, following him into an alleyway. Graffiti on the walls in strange symbols fell upon them below twisted black fire escapes decorated with drying dirty brown rags. A toothless, mad old woman laughed at them from a balcony, drawing her grandson close. The demon could smell the flesh of his charge, the doctor, racing down the dark alley to the other end, dodging across another square filled to the brim with the helpless. They pushed their way through a village of improvised tents and street musicians until they reached a simple home, alone on an empty grass lot.

"He is here!" The demon spit, his acidic saliva falling from his mouth. "He is here – I can smell him!"

"What do we do?" Gúzman asked, shaking.

The demon ignored him and approached the house, heading to the backyard. A wood fence surrounded a grassy patch of land and two tall trees with two swings hanging from their limbs. A child, a boy of ten, kicked his feet, flying back and forth, shouting gleefully at an empty house. The parents had surely gone to work, leaving the child alone to face a madman possessed with thoughts of horrible deeds.

And, truly, the madman was there, visible, watching the child on that swing from the safety of a series of thick bushes. The dark figure was clutching a butcher knife, licking the blade, murmuring to himself, his eyes ablaze. But this was no demon. *This* was a man – a poor, suffering, lonely man who had been twisted into himself by the forces of fate to become something he should not be.

The priest and the demon waited in anticipation, knowing that this one act of murder would be sufficient for them to complete their mission. Perhaps the plan made *no sense*, but Gúzman knew that if he completed the plan, his life would be given back to him. His heart jumped in his chest.

The child had stopped swinging and sat with his back to the bushes, tying his shoelaces innocently, singing a sweet melody as the thin, distorted man approached with a knife in his hands. Gúzman grabbed his own throat to try to keep himself from screaming, watching the demon Agares for signs of humanity. But he saw none and, finally, he could take no more.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Gúzman shouted in his archaic Spanish accent, standing behind the fence. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING? STOP! OH STOP!”

The doctor stopped in his tracks and the child turned, eyes as wide as onions. The child began to scream, thrashing his arms. Agares turned to Gúzman and hissed “You fool! You damn fool! You stopped him!” as the doctor dropped his knife and ran. The doctor jumped over the fence and leaped off into the shadows.

“I couldn’t let him do it,” Gúzman whimpered. “I couldn’t let him. Oh, I don’t care about any plan!”

“Damn you!” Agares shouted, slapping the priest across the face.

The two of them walked towards the inn, proceeding in a slow, tired gallop. They seem to glide through molasses, past smudges of existence, brown and tired and poor, until they had reached the square with its cluttered masses. They sat by the fountain in silence, until they heard sirens and police cars.

The blue and red lights blinked. The doctor was brought out of the house, his hands behind him, bound by silver handcuffs that gleamed near the police vehicles. The voices buzzed around them, whimpering, stammering waves of sound brushing through the crowd.

“The boy was one of his patients,” Agares muttered under his breath. “The boy knew him.”

“What will happen now?”

“He will go to jail,” Agares responded.

“But what about the plan?”

“I don’t know.”

“This makes no sense at all!” Gúzman exclaimed, his hands tearing at his cheeks, digging into his flesh. “All of this! This makes no sense at all! Why must the plan work like this?”

“I don’t know,” Agares said. “I only know that Yahweh’s plan calls for it.”

“I can’t do this!” Gúzman pronounced, his lips trembling. “I can’t destroy a man like this. I’m a priest for God’s sake!”

“You didn’t think much of drinking and whoring and torturing people while you were alive!” The demon snapped.

“I’m a different man now,” Gúzman whimpered. “I’m not that monster any more. I lived each of the lives of my victims every night as I slept.”

“We will never be together as father and son,” the demon said. “You will be returned to Hell. I will live as a demon.”

“T-there is no other way?” Gúzman stammered. “There is no other way for us to be together, for this plan to work?”

Agares shook his head to indicate that there was no other way and added: “My instructions were perfectly clear, my dear Father. I was to try to tempt the doctor because this is the preferred path to achieving the plan and would require no changes, but if I could not tempt him...if I could not tempt him, I would have to kill him. That is the only other way to salvage Yahweh’s plan now.”

“You don’t need me to do it!” Gúzman squealed. “You can do it alone!”

“You’re in this too,” Agares stated. “You’ve been chosen for this task and the task is yours and yours alone. It belongs to no one else. To salvage the plan, we must kill the doctor.”

“Maybe he will get out of jail and kill after that?”

“No. We must make sure that the plan can be salvaged. *We must kill him.*”

The demon walked away from the fountain, leaving the priest staring into space, wondering how a man of God had ever wandered so far away from the path of light. Once again,

after burning in the fires of the Dark Desert for murdering innocents, he was called upon to murder for Yahweh.

Teresa swallowed the barn air like a gaping sinkhole swallowing water at the bottom of a sad, lonely ocean and released a brief explosion of oxygen as the air raced out of her lungs and into the cold night. Her eyes widened and her fingers stabbed into the pale palms of her soft hands, their perfection unperturbed by the farm work she had performed for the better part of a decade. She closed her eyes and saw the blue angel again standing before her. She could not stand it. She could not remain inside the barn.

So, she ran into the night, through the town, the footsteps of the Old Man sounding behind her as he chased her through the mud. The city lights were burning, candles strapped to masts, and blackened children wading through the waters of the recent rain. Plop. Plop. Plop. She could hear the Old Man behind her, following her. She stopped running. She was standing near a small church, with the Old Man panting beside her.

“Why did you run like that?” the Old Man inquired, his hands shaking. “I’m too old to keep up with such a run. I feel as if my heart could burst from my chest. Quest from God or no quest from God, I think I might die before we ever reach the prisoner.”

“The prisoner is my grandfather,” she replied, her voice shaking. “My grandfather was a priest by the name of Gúzman. My father was his bastard. One day, my father came home and he found us slaughtered.”

She moved her dress so as to expose her shoulder, revealing a dark red scar from where a sword had sliced into her soft flesh. The Old Man growled in anger at the thought that any human could have harmed such a beautiful, delicate woman. A good woman. A virtuous woman. She stared into his eyes and his anger increased, his disgust for mankind growing at each minute. He could see that this truly was a decent woman and he felt guilt washing over him for his own disrespectful behavior.

“My father found his family dead,” she continued. “All of them died, except for me, his wife and children dead. I was the only survivor. So, my father, the famous thief, the most famous thief in all the land, went off into the wilderness and hung himself. I was raised by a local washerwoman.”

“My God,” the Old Man whispered. “Now, the angel comes to you and tells you to save the man who started it all, who initiated your family’s suffering. Had your father not been a bastard, he would not have become a thief and your poor family would be alive. God truly works in mysterious ways! To ask you to show mercy to such a man!”

“I have half a mind to let the scoundrel suffer,” she hissed. But after speaking these harsh words, she immediately repented. She could not allow any man to suffer under such conditions, to be tortured constantly, day after day. The blue angel had asked her to save him. She would have to follow the blue angel’s command. God wanted her to save this man.

“Will you give up and go home?”

“No. God has given me my orders and I will follow his imperative.”

The Old Man knelt before her and kissed her hand. He apologized to her for his rude behavior, told her he was a dog and a fool, promised to always treat her as a woman deserving of his admiration and dedication. He pledged his life to her and to God. He swore that the prisoner would be set free. Then, he rose to his feet and they returned to the barn.

Beyond infinity, there is a space apart from time, dimension, and energy, where a noble and ageless race has always resided. Made of stars they are and full of all light and dark matter that has ever existed. Here, in this zone beyond all human understanding, the Yahwehs live as a tribe. Their leader, the Supreme Yahweh, the largest universe of them all, equal to the dimensions of each of the other universes combined and multiplied by an infinite factor.

They floated before him in awe, the other Yahwehs, shining amidst oblivion, awaiting for their leader's words. He would define the path that the Yahwehs would take, as he always did, in order to continue their infinite existence indefinitely. A plague had struck the Yahwehs, a disease that threatened them.

"*Brothers and sisters!*" the Supreme Yahweh announced his voice reverberating through the purple murk of the non-universe. "I know that you are frightened by the possibilities before you, by the possibility that our lives may be in jeopardy -"

"We will all die from this plague!" One Yahweh amidst the trillions shouted. "There is no cure! We will all die!"

"The end of the tribe is at hand!" Another shouted in agreement as others muttered in countless conversations. There was an old people, their endless existence making them uncomfortable with change.

"Silence!" the Supreme Yahweh yelled. "I am your ruler and mine is the final word, the truth above *all truths*. I have always been the Yahweh leader and shall continue to be your leader for all time. You must listen to the truth which I will give you - there is no doubt that a plague has come to trouble our people, threatening us. There is no doubt that the tribe is suffering danger for the first time. Our immortality is at risk and this has created new difficulties, unpredicted dilemmas, problems we do not know how to solve."

All of the trillions of Yahwehs present understood that a nightmare had come to exist among them and that the source of that malady was imbedded in their very nature and appeared to be unstoppable. Every Yahweh had Gatekeepers, beings within maintaining the workings of internal life systems. The Gatekeeper beings within certain of the Yahwehs had begun malfunctioning. Yet no one knew the cause of the infirmity – why had so many of the Gatekeeper beings decided to destroy their Yahwehs? Could this problem pass from Yahweh to Yahweh, from one member of the tribe to the next? The Yahwehs floated in the void, perplexed for the first time in an eternity.

“Since we cannot solve the problem,” the Supreme Yahweh continued, his powerful voice captivating his eager audience, “we will *mitigate* it. We will take the necessary measures to quarantine the Yahwehs who are infected and we will *destroy* the infected members. This catastrophe has left us no other choice!”

“Murderer!” one Yahweh screamed. “Murderer!”

“You’re going to kill your own kind!” another shouted. “Killer! Killer!”

“The horror! Oh, the horror!” yet another squealed. Voices sounded in the void from a trillion different points, converging in a general murmur of dissatisfaction.

“*Silence!*” the Supreme Yahweh snarled, his eyes a thousand galaxies glowing amidst the mist, his gestures authoritative. “*Silence all!* I did not make this decision easily. It has been the most painful decision this tribe has ever had to make. I am sure none of you envy me, the position I am in, the necessity to make these decisions to allow for the continued survival of our tribe but it must be done! It must be done! This disease will infect all of us. It is spreading as we speak. We know nothing about it. We must try to stop it while we can, must we not?”

“Nothing to be done,” one Yahweh in particular muttered to himself in the oblivion of the non-universe. Yahweh xxx8x8RA knew he was one of the infected members. He had hoped that the priest, Father Gúzman, he had sent on a hopeless mission would rise triumphant, cure him. But, of course, the priest had not accomplished anything before the tribe had come to the

inevitable decision to terminate the infected. All his infinite years, his infinite experiences – *all of it* would be lost.

“My soul,” Yahweh xxx8x8RA whispered, “my life is at an end. Inexistence shall be my punishment. I shall cease to exist. *I* who have lived so long...so long... everything I am and know shall be lost...all my infinite wisdom...”

“Do not worry,” another Yahweh whispered, placing a blazing arm on a shining shoulder of stars and galaxies and black holes. “The tribe will *live on* and we will guard your memory for all of eternity.”

“Thank you,” Yahweh xxx8x8RA responded. “But I knew my time would come...I knew that I would have no choice.”

Blazing tears fell from their eyes. Yahweh xxx8x8RA could feel countless sets of orbs staring at him, waiting for his reaction. The Supreme Yahweh raised his stellar arms once again, standing before all of them in his eternal majesty and infinite wisdom.

“My tribe!” he said. “I ask that those infected begin the process of self-elimination. I thank you for your sacrifice. The Yahwehs will remember each and every one of you. Your sacrifice will not be in vain!”

The three-thousand-one-hundred-and-fifty-one infected Yahwehs blinked amidst the endless sea, their energies directed inwards, slowly fading. One of the affected Yahwehs began screaming but others assured her that there was no other choice and that her sacrifice would allow for the survival of the tribe.

“Why?” she shouted. “Why is this happening? Our tribe...our tribe is being destroyed... we shall not survive...we shall be killed...” A Yahweh standing next to her whispered his love for her in her ear. Universes they would have created together, thousands of other Yahwehs they would have spawned together - but that future was gone.

“*Do not cower before this sacrifice!*” The Supreme Yahweh shouted. “Spare the tribe your pain! Spare the tribe our extinction! Do this for us and *save us!*”

And just as suddenly as these prophetic words had been spoken by their leader, Yahweh
xxx8x8RA closed his eyes and the endless zoo of eternal beings vanished into a smoky haze,
replaced by a cave... a terrible cave...

He directed himself into his inner being...

Yahweh xxx8x8RA was inside his inner Hell...

Here, to start the process of self-destruction.

Lava spewed forth and human bodies burned in the stream as a giant creature looked
on... ready... Each of the thousand astonished eyes possessed by the creature focused on the
Yahweh appearing before it and the creature's reptilian mouth stood open in sheer surprise. It
beat its thirteen limbs and two sets of wings.

This was the Lord of the Dark Desert, the fallen angel, the harbinger of doom. A simple
nod was sufficient for the devil to understand that the burning bodies in the river of lava, the
screams of torture ringing off the cavern walls, and the temptation of souls – all of this was over.
The End Times had arrived.

“You are as much a part of me as anything,” the Yahweh whispered. “You are as much a
part of my existence as any of the stars making up my atoms. But the purpose for which you
were designed has twisted and destroyed your mind. You are mad and suffering. No *more*.”

“But the *plan*?” the creature asked, perplexed.

“I’m afraid that there is no more plan,” the Yahweh responded. “It is all over, my dark
old friend. I am sick. This is the final cycle, the last cycle of my existence. There shall be no
other cycles.”

“But, Yahweh,” the devil muttered, snout twisted in an uncomprehending snarl, “I don’t
understand. How can it be over? It is too soon.”

The Yahweh shook a tired head and murmured: “It is over, my son. Begin the End Times
now. Summon Abbadon.”

Lucifer stared in all of his madness, his rage, his faculties distorted by the need to serve as a dark warrior for thousands of years. The poor creature had been created for such a task, for the preparation of the world, for the beginning of the final days. Each cycle lasted precisely the same amount of time and needed its villain, its devil, born to last until the end, the being always falling into psychosis. Then, a new cycle would begin and a new devil would be formed and all of it would begin again. On and on.

Except that it wouldn't. These *End Times* would be the only real End Times ever to have occurred, the first true end, the first annihilation ever to come to fruition. Lucifer, despite all his delusion and spite and whirlwind madness, knew that the true end of existence was here, the moment he had anticipated with such rapine delight but now wished away.

"Creator," the creature whispered, "may I ask you for one favor before the end?"

The Yahweh nodded, knowing the question the devil would ask of him. Every mad, lost keeper of evil who had ever come into being always asked for the same thing when faced with the End Times. The Yahweh placed a hand on the creature's shoulder.

"Yes," the Yahweh whispered. "Tell me what you need."

"I'd like to be me again, to be beautiful, just for a bit," the insane beast pleaded.

The Yahweh nodded and a bright light encircled Satan, burning away his flesh and revealing a splendid form underneath. *This* was Lucifer the Seraphim, the angel before he had fallen. And he was beautiful and bright. Lucifer lowered his head and fell to one knee before the Yahweh. He whispered a soft prayer and rose to his feet, hugging his Father close to his breast, singing softly: "I love you, Father. I love you." The Yahweh placed a hand of stars on his most terrible son's back and pressed him close to his chest.

"I will summon Abbadon," Lucifer said, backing away from the Yahweh. As he backed away, he began to look hideous again, melting into the creature of multiple eyes and sharp, shark-like teeth. He flew into the darkness, leaving the condemned to burn down to their bones in the lake of fire.

Yahweh gazed at the condemned, shriveling, moaning. The senselessness of it all! Maybe the Gatekeepers were right to end it, to bring about a final halt. Without an end, things had no meaning, no value. Lives were destroyed. Children disappeared, engulfed by flames. Others were absorbed as nutrients in the continued operation of a cruel machine. For what? For what purpose? To what end? A ceaseless barrage of memories, one melting into the next, blurring the lines of reality?

And what did all those memories mean without a beginning or an end? He was the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end – but he lived without any beginnings or ends. Except *now* that everything was over and he could *feel* pain once again, and understand the pain of the humans and other beings fueling his perpetual existence.

Satan returned with the destroyer, the demon Abaddon, emerging from the shadows. The humans in the stream of lava had melted and would find themselves reappearing inside a cell in an infernal jail, awaiting the next round of torture. The cavern was empty now, save for the three figures – two demons and a lost God.

“I am here to serve you, Yahweh,” Abaddon hissed, bowing before the creator of all things. Satan also bowed, his eyes directed towards the ground in sad contemplation.

“The end is here,” the Yahweh pronounced.

Abaddon nodded his head and declared, his voice echoing off the cavern walls: “*Then it shall be! The End Times have arrived!*” His form dispersed into a giant cloud of locusts twirling about over the lakes of fire. His mission was the consumption and destruction of all things, including the very Dark Desert where he had been spawned. So, the cloud of locusts expanded and expanded, consuming the cavern walls, eating them, causing the entire ceiling of the unholy cavern to crumble.

“The End Times are here!” Satan cried as the boulders crashed down, sending waves of lava flying into the air. But Satan’s mouth was soon filled with locusts, his eyes covered. He was slowly being eaten, consumed by forces beyond his madness and control.

The Yahweh was gone. The locusts devoured the thousand eyes of Satan, bit into his snout and tongue, chewing on his flesh. In a matter of seconds, the insane king of all evil, the paradigm of all rot, had been reduced to a half-eaten crust of unrecognizable matter. And, soon, that matter too was gone and *nothing* was left. The Great Evil was gone but the clouds of locusts had not finished and, as the walls of the cavern gave way, Abbadon consumed the entirety of the demons spread throughout the sands of the Dark Desert, in all of its caverns, rivers of fire, infernal complexes, mires and thorny briar patches.

The Condemned, billions of them, were surrounded by buzzing clouds of pests, gluing onto their skin, biting into them as they shouted and begged for mercy. And, in mere seconds, they too were consumed. The locusts did not fly from jail cell to jail cell. They multiplied, each locust dividing into two or three, until all space was occupied by them.

The Condemned's horrible lives ended even more tragically than they had begun – consumed they were, eaten by the thousands, all of the legions of hell swallowed into buzzing clouds of small stomachs multiplying and multiplying.

Finally, Hell was no more.

But the pests did not stop there. They continued to multiply and multiply, up through the seams separating the Dark Desert and the other parts of the body of the Yahweh. They sprang forth from the most remote corner of that universe, unexplored and unknown to man, and they multiplied at an increasing rate – seven, eight, ten, fifty-seven of them born of a single locust – until entire solar systems were eclipsed. Moons could not be seen, planets had been engulfed, devoured, leaving no dust to occupy ethereal space.

The march continued on and on, stars flooded by locusts melting within their heat, covering them, knifing into them until they were simply extinguished and all life in that system perished. Quadrillions of life forms ceased to exist as light after light was drowned and darkness flooded galaxy after galaxy. They multiplied – faster and faster and faster. Each giant locust produced an army of others. On and on. On and on.

And they multiplied *even* more quickly, their numbers increasing wildly until they occupied half of the universe and thirsted for more. On and on. On and on. So, they expanded more and more as a cloud, multiplied. For this was the body of Abbadon the Destroyer, he who would bring about the end of this cycle of existence and – in *this* particular cycle and only *this* particular cycle – bring about a true and permanent finality to all things.

They reached the human Earth, the clouds of locusts, some of the locusts now the size of continents or planets. They had eaten through other planets to reach this blue pearl with its tiny moon whirling about it and its massive oceans. But they were finally here, charging forward through space, the smaller ones being given a chance to feed.

These smaller locusts dove into the atmosphere of the Earth, waves of them crashing down into the ocean, gorging themselves on the waters and expanding in size. They crashed into buildings in cities, causing rocks to fall upon the screaming populace below. They fed on the metal of the monuments and expanded. They fed on the faces of the shouting humans, and they expanded.

They consumed the metal of the cars, consumed the steering wheels, the skulls of the dead, the flesh of the wounded. They consumed women and children, the elderly and the young. They drank the dust and dirt. They swallowed the waters of the rivers. They dined on the walls of temples.

Shots were fired at them, nuclear weapons were detonated, but they absorbed that energy and grew, swallowing up homes and buses. Finally, there were no more cities and no more towns and no more people.

The locusts had landed in Mendoza, in Argentina, crashing into the square, swallowing the mounds of the impoverished sleeping underneath blankets, crashing through the walls of the inns, swallowing the innkeepers. They had devoured Doctor Lopez's family, one by one, and the bricks making up the walls of his home. They had paraded through the shantytowns, devoured the corrugated plastic ceilings of make-shift homes and small motorcycles. They had seized upon

the people and consumed them, biting into their bones, crushing them, pulverizing them until there was nothing left.

They had proceeded to the Mendoza jail, breaking through the green walls into the corridors, biting into the guards in their blue suits and their badges glistening, delighting on the bodies of the doctors, nurses and janitors. They had entered the jail cells, greeted by the screams of madmen, murderers, prostitutes and thieves.

“Spare me!” One thief, a man with a long black beard and bushy eyebrows had shouted. They had not heeded his words but one of them had proceeded to feast through his midsection, bursting through his back. Others had relished the man’s remains.

“I am a father,” a murderer shouted, “please let me go!” But one of the locusts had jumped on his head and devoured his body whole, swallowing him rapidly.

Doctor Lopez, thin and tired, had been cowering in a corner of his cell, cursing himself for having let his emotions get the better of him, for having allowed himself to think unthinkable thoughts, when they had imbibed the metal bars of his cell and crawled towards him. Three of them, massive locusts but still children to the others, smaller than the continental-sized locusts floating somewhere in the darkness above the blue gem.

They had seized the doctor, two of them biting into his legs, pulling them off his body while another snapped at his head and ripped it off his frame. They had imbibed his blood and left nothing of him, not a bone. They had crawled down the hallways, thousands of them infesting the jail. They had destroyed everything.

Outside, on the street, the locusts had come across the demon Agares, the demon-son of the priest. The demon had been kneeling, his head bowed, as if he was singing a prayer. “Forgive me,” the demon had whispered. And the locusts of Abbadon had jumped onto Agares and bit into his arms, eating his hands and feet and head, leaving nothing of him behind. This demon too was gone forever.

And so the fleet continued its parade through the universe, devouring stars and planets and asteroids, leaving nothing. They bit into the bones of civilizations, leaving nothing of monuments, nothing of structures, their churches and pyramids. No, they could leave *nothing* behind.

As they continued, they came across the Seraphim, millions of them, their bodies and swords of flame ready for the final battle. They came to them in the middle of the blackness, where there was no air to allow for sound. In silence, they battled, the Seraphim charging forth, swords ready, swinging wildly.

Gabriel, more magnificent than the others when in his fiery form, his sword pointed at his enemies, screamed his cry of battle: "To the last man! Destroy them all!" He sent his troops to war, striking the locusts, slicing them to pieces.

A celestial battle of planetary proportions ensued as warriors of flame charged continental-sized locusts. Gabriel sliced through hundreds, his sword chopping through the blackness with unbelievable speed and accuracy, sending pieces of the evil creatures flying to multiple directions.

They met like two opposing forces but one was stronger and, quickly, the locusts had swarmed upon each of the Seraphim and extinguished their fires. They burned and died, the locusts, but they spawned more and more, overtaking the warriors of light, pressing upon them.

It was over. The angels were no more. Gabriel was left alone.

Though the mightiest angel was truly alone, he did not feel fear or anger. He had been designed to be noble, to love his Yahweh above all else and to sacrifice for him in the belief that his master was the true representative of light amidst the hate. This angel too was devoured.

The locusts proceeded, continuing their quest for destruction, but these disparate pieces gliding their way through the emptiness of space, multiplying, growing in size, expanding to occupy every available space, to become a tidal wave of death - a consciousness, an awareness connected each of them. Through the madness of these last days, a thought occurred to all of

them. A thought occurred to Abbadon through their united psyche. *The Gatekeepers? Where had they gone? Where were the Gatekeepers?*

She awakened to find the old man staring at her. She lifted herself up and they walked through the town to a path leading to the top of a hill. The wind blew quietly, grazing her red cheeks and tossing her hair back in a gentle whirlwind of gold. The Old Man's hair remained unperturbed, as if he was immune to the wind, as if it could not bear to touch him. The day stumbled forward into the afternoon and, by the time night had arrived they had climbed up and down many hills in absolute silence. Finally, they reached a settlement.

"This is the place," the Old Man murmured. "It was here that I saw the man, your grandfather, being tortured. Oh, he was a poor creature, screaming like a pig."

She nodded and they continued the procession, weaving down a green hill. A fortress of pitch black stone stood near the entrance to the hamlet. There could not have been more than two hundred inhabitants in total residing there. The mud huts with their grass roofs had the appearance of sad, ghostly children gazing at the dusty streets. Someone was whistling an old hymn. As they entered the city and heard the song, they instinctively followed the melody, searching for its source.

"It is an old hymn," she whispered.

"I know," the Old Man hissed back, staring at the black holes on the brown surfaces of the homes. "This is an accursed place!"

They found the square in a matter of a few paces, and the prisoner, blue in the moonlight, kneeling on a patch of grass. He was emaciated, his ribs protruding visibly from his body, his taught arms tied behind him to a mast. He wore nothing but a brown towel tied around his waist – no, it had been nailed into his waist. He trembled with the arrival of the cold breeze.

"He does not see us," the Old Man observed. "He is insane. He does not see the two of us here. We are standing near him with no one else around but he does not see us."

"He has lived through this torture for God knows how long," she replied.

She approached her grandfather and looked into his eyes, her hand patting his soft hair. His face was a leather sack, meatless, droopy, and lifeless. She kissed his forehead and hugged him.

“We should cut him loose and get out of here,” the Old Man whispered. He produced a knife and approached, slashing until the prisoner had been freed. The prisoner could not walk.

“Help me with him,” Teresa whispered, pressing her tiny frame against the man.

The Old Man nodded and they lifted the starving figure to his feet, slowly dragging him through the town. The houses appeared to be empty. The fortress seemed to contain no soldiers at all, no sentinel standing watch. The sound of the wind blowing through the houses reminded Teresa of a beggar playing a flute for alms. She had found Old Gúzman. He was a strange living corpse, a sad sort of creature. The world was full of odd creatures.

Octopus-like creatures with dark brown skin, dozens of arms flailing about, feet placed in black boots and oblong heads covered by felt caps, gathered in the alley below them armed with spears. They formed a circle and one – they were all the same size, shape and appearance – charged at another and a fight began. The other creatures in the circle clicked and whirred, speaking a bizarre language. They wore no clothes, save for their black boots and felt caps placed on the domes of their heads, above each of their two massive eyes.

The alley was situated in between two structures: a tall red building, rectangular and engraved with depictions of war and a smaller, dark brown, square building without any engravings but with a banner hanging over its front door. The banner was purple with gold lettering, decorated with odd symbols.

The city stretched before them from that balcony as they looked down at that alley. Two suns shone on the horizon of planet Eyemuss, the farthest planet from the Dark Desert and, therefore, the one that would take the longest for the locusts to reach. The two suns were like the

eyes of the people of this land, two gigantic coins, blazing crimson, illuminating the massive city before them – spiralling towers, bridges, and buildings of all manner of shapes and sizes.

“Why did you bring him here?” One of the blue creatures on the balcony, floating just above the floor inquired, casting a tired glance at the catatonic man huddled in a corner of the unfurnished room. “He serves no purpose.”

The other blue creature, Gatekeeper Two, gazed into his brother’s eyes and then joined him as he pondered the human man crying: “I do not know, brother. It is almost as if I am drawn to him. Saving him was the right thing to do. Among all others, the perishing masses, I felt that I had to save this man. Maybe because I want to know *why*.”

“Why what, brother?”

“Why he still has faith after everything that happened to him. Sent to Hell he was, for fighting for the Yahweh during his normal human life. He was brought out of Hell and told his son had been made into a demon by the Yahweh. But look at him now! He is praying to the Yahweh. His faith has not been shaken. It is a *mystery* to me, my brother.”

Gatekeeper One shook his head and pronounced his words such that each syllable fell as heavy as gold bricks upon the listener: “Such things matter not any more. Soon, the locusts will be here, in this corner of the universe, and this Yahweh will perish.”

Before the end of the human earth, Terra, the Gatekeepers had come together as brothers once again as the clouds of the locusts charged. Gatekeeper One, knowing that the end of the universe was at hand, knowing that the End Times had arrived, had come to the Earth to save his brother from destruction, to transport him to the farthest world. They had contacted other Gatekeepers inside other Yahwehs. It was here, on Eyemuss, that the rebel Gatekeepers from different Yahwehs would have their meeting – their celebration.

“Here,” Gatekeeper Two whispered, handing his brother a small book entitled *The End of Perpetual Slavery*. “This is for you. It started all of this.” Many cycles ago, a Gatekeeper from another Yahweh had appeared and handed him the book.

“Do you recall the Gatekeeper who handed this to you?”

“No. Only that he was from another Yahweh and that others were part of the Movement, and that I should read it and think about it. I read it and thought about it – it *haunted* my thoughts – cycle after cycle, as new universes were created and destroyed, souls discarded or absorbed by my Yahweh, until I decided to act.”

Gatekeeper One opened the book and fell upon the first page, reading the passage aloud: “*The Yahweh tribe’s system of survival is fundamentally immoral in that these beings depend on the creation of conscious organisms to feed their perpetual existence. The organic peoples existing within each Yahweh have emotions and feelings as strong and as beautiful as that of any Yahweh or any Gatekeeper. Yet, they live as mere fuel, falsely promised eternity. The Gatekeeper is a tool of the Yahweh tribe, maintaining this slavery system intact. Within this treaty, I shall argue that the destruction of all Yahwehs (and the organisms living within them) is preferable to allowing the existence of such a system. I will take the most insane position possible and argue, therefore, that Gatekeeper suicide and massacre of untold numbers of living peoples, in this context, is not only perfectly rational but the only moral option.*”

A strange contraption slung upon a wall of the apartment began to chime, its many pointers spinning wildly to symbols painted along jagged edges. It was *time*. Beings, blue and ethereal, floated forward from the horizon of the interminable city. Six beings. They came towards the balcony and landed.

Gatekeeper Two recognized one of the Gatekeepers as the messenger for the resistance who had brought him the book. They exchanged embraces and greetings. Their plans had worked better than they had expected with the tribe ordering the suicide of the infected Yahwehs. Yahweh after Yahweh had shut himself down into a final cycle – but trillions of other Yahwehs still survived and the Resistance’s work was far from over.

“Why is this human here?” One of the Gatekeepers inquired.

“At the end of Terra,” Gatekeeper Two explained, “I saw this human and took him... I know not why but he captivates me. His faith is unshakeable.”

“A curiosity,” another of the Gatekeepers said, “but nothing worth worrying about. One human among the billions in his world, all of them now reduced to inexistence. We have more important matters to address.”

The Gatekeepers gathered in a circle, held hands and sung a soft song, the notes causing the walls to reverberate until the strange clock fell off its mounting and crashed onto the ground. The noise of the clock dispersing into a thousand small pieces halted the singing. One Gatekeeper released the hands of the two Gatekeepers next to him, lifting his arms up, while the other Gatekeepers continued holding hands. Gúzman sat in the corner, mesmerized.

The Gatekeeper with raised arms proclaimed: “Brothers! We gather here in *this* Yahweh, in *this* world as the armies of locusts charge forward for the purpose of a celebration! We have moved forward considerably in our quest for the destruction of the Yahwehs. As your Leader, I am proud to say that we have overcome the odds against us. We have *killed* several of the Yahwehs!”

The Gatekeepers released their interlaced hands and thundering claps sounded as they beat their blue hands together with notable felicity. Shouts of “Hurrah!” erupted like champagne from a shaken bottle after the cork had been shot into the ceiling. The twin suns had risen to such a point that their energies concentrated on that room and the room was flooded with light.

“Dead!” the Leader shouted, resuming his speech. “I remember when I first began this quest. I thought myself mad – the idea of ending all existence for every being, including myself? But I came to realize that it is no madness to desire the abolition of a horrid slavery, the slavery of the organic beings like this human -” The Leader paused and pointed to Gúzman and resumed his speech: “-is never to be tolerated, but it is not his slavery only that I seek to abolish. I seek to destroy my *own* slavery and the slavery forced upon *all* Gatekeepers! We live cycle after cycle

performing the purposeless task of perpetuating the existence of beings who are *no better* and *no wiser* than ourselves! *It will stop!*”

The Gatekeepers erupted into shouts of “Hurrah!” once again, clapping their hands vigorously, celebrating their victory. The Leader smiled and lifted his hands, bringing immediate silence to the room once again. He resumed his speech: “The task is now to repeat what we have here! As a Gatekeeper within the Supreme Yahweh, Leader of the Yahwehs, I have access to all plans. I know what will disrupt the cycle plan for each and every one of the Yahwehs. We do not need to rely upon Gatekeepers within each Yahweh to kill that Yahweh. As we all know, some of them have refused to join our cause!”

“Traitors!”

“Fools! Cowards!”

“Yes, my brothers,” the Leader said, shaking his head sadly. “I am afraid that many of us Gatekeepers are cowards, but with my access to all the plans, we will begin *invading* Yahweh after Yahweh, disrupting the plans ourselves, slowly growing into an army. **THAT ARMY SHALL KILL ALL OF THE YAHWEHS!**”

The Gatekeepers exploded into louder shouts and clapping and singing. Gúzman lifted himself onto his feet and approached them, his hands shaking violently. The light of the twin suns burned at his flesh, the heat causing his skin to ache, but he continued walking until he had reached the middle of the room.

He covered his eyes with a trembling arm and gazed at each Gatekeeper individually. Then, he pronounced his testament of faith. He spoke to the Gatekeepers about the need to serve their betters, to be good, preached about the desire for unity with the Creator, quoted chapter and verse from various religious texts, and declared himself a proud servant of his Maker.

“We cannot want to kill he who has made us,” he said. “What would be the sense in that? We must trust his will, obey him with great servility, bow our heads before his might and hope

that he chooses us to be a part of his eternal existence. Such is the only approach we can take with our maker.”

The Gatekeepers erupted into hisses and insults, calling the priest a “fool” full of “childish notions” and telling him that no human could possess enough knowledge to judge such things – they called him an “idiot,” a “moron” and a “buffoon.” They continued casting insults upon him until the Leader lifted his arms once again.

The Leader sighed and spoke patiently: “All of these notions you have in your mind, my human friend, are falsities. The good are absorbed by Yahweh as nutrients. The bad are cast into the emptiness of the non-universe. Humans are food for the Yahweh Tribe, a way for them to continue existing. They are perpetual beings and you are nothing to them.”

The Gatekeepers erupted into hisses and insults once again, calling the priest a “dupe” and a “rube,” calling the Yahwehs a race of “charlatans” and “grifters.” Gúzman retreated from the intolerable light, back to his shadowy corner, condensing himself into a compact ball, his arms wrapped around his knees, his chin tucked into his chest.

His exhaustion led him to fall into slumber abruptly as the Gatekeepers continued their discussions, formulating plans of attack, developing strategies for the destruction of all things. His dreams fell upon him like a mist, surrounding him and hiding him from himself. The mist was now everywhere and he was alone.

He saw his son approach him, his boy with his golden curls, passing him before turning into Agares, the horrid demon. Then, he saw his victims – the family from the hills he had accused of heresy, the baker who worshipped pagan deities. They appeared to him at first as they had been before he had performed his duty and then, as they drifted away into the mist, they would transform. He would see them as he had left them, mutilated corpses, deformed.

Had it all been worth anything, his quests for holiness, his thirst for communion with a greater power? His desires had led him to torture children, had taken him to the depths of Hell,

forced him to suffer. His son had been made a demon by the forces he worshipped. His life had been purposeless.

“*Why? Why? All of it was for nothing! I have lost my son! I hurt people – innocent, good people – and I suffered in the lakes of fire. For what? For having dedicated my life to beings who feed on souls?*”

A knife appeared before him on the ground, a dagger with a wooden handle and a ten-inch, curved blade like a small scythe. He lifted the dagger up to his own neck with trembling hands, positioned the blade against the artery. He had killed dozens of men and women by slashing into that artery and now he would slash his own. Blood fell from his neck and he dropped the blade. There was nothing but mist and a grassy plain that stretched on forever.

He lay on the field, the mist above him, the wet grass on his back, thick blood draining from his neck. He thought to himself again and again as the life ran out of him: “*Why was I such a fool?*” And just as he died, he awoke to find himself in that room on Eyemuss once again, with only one Gatekeeper. Although he could not differentiate between the Gatekeepers, he knew that this was Gatekeeper Two.

“*I’ve been a fool my whole life,*” the priest whispered. “*I killed believing that I was doing good. Now, I know my faith was my undoing.*”

The Gatekeeper approached him and Gúzman felt a wave of compassion emanating from the blue man. The blue man placed a hand on his shoulder and patted him, like one pets a sad child. For millions of years, the Gatekeeper had suffered with the same conclusion.

“*You shall be fine,*” the Gatekeeper whispered. “*But you cannot stay here. In a few hours, the clouds of death shall arrive. The locusts will tear this world apart, molecule by molecule, until there is nothing left. I am bound to you – I do not know why. Perhaps I see a bit of myself in you. I see the same naïve thing that I myself once was. Now, I am hollow, much like you, and the realization that led me to this hollowness leads me to the task of ending everything.*”

“*What will happen to me?*”

The Gatekeeper smiled kindly and his voice flowed from his blue form like a flower dancing gently upon a sparkling stream of water: “I will take you to another Yahweh, a parallel universe. You will replace another Gúzman in that universe. It will take the Resistance millenia before we kill all of the Yahwehs. You will have a chance at a new life. You will be able to have children, live with joy.”

“But it will all end.”

The Gatekeeper laughed and said: “It was all going to end regardless.”

The priest fell into silence and the Gatekeeper knelt down next to him. Whiiiiirrrrrr. A strange sound sprang forth from the belly of the blue creature and a blue bubble of energy radiated from his heart, passing through Gúzman’s flesh, surrounding the two of them. The ball of energy hardened and it appeared to the priest that he had been placed inside a massive glass bauble. The bauble rose into the air and floated into the sky, leaving that room behind.

They floated past structures and into thick white clouds glistening with electricity. The marble was then shot into a tunnel of flashing lights – blues, greens and yellows, streaking past them at unknown speeds. Then, there was space. They were near a planet with a small moon circling it. The planet was a deep, blood red and the moon a sparkling blue.

“Is that where we are going?” Gúzman asked, extending a trembling finger.

“No,” the Gatekeeper replied. “We need to leave this Yahweh and jump into another one. We will do so through a passageway on the surface of that moon.”

“I will try to leave all this behind. I have been a fool, blinded by my faith my entire life. I will trust in *nothing*. I will trust in nothing, believe in nothing until the end of my days!”

The clear ball carried the two passengers into a wide well with thick walls of grayish brick constructed on the surface of that blue moon. They fell into the blackness of that well until they were enveloped. They floated through the black until Gúzman could see a purple circle, widening, growing. The priest could see that it was an exit. A purple void.

They were surrounded by streaks of light once again and then by blackness. Then, they were in a tunnel with brick walls and they shot out of a well onto the surface of another moon. *This* moon was a light yellow color. The marble bounced twice on the surface of this strange moon and then jumped up into space, speeding away from that stellar body, towards the stars. The journey did not end.

They were surrounded by lights of all colors once again and, when these lights had dissipated, they came to a halt before a blue planet decorated with white clouds and circled by a gray moon. The Gatekeeper extended an arm and pointed at the planet.

“That is your new home,” he whispered. *“It is a parallel Terra where you can live just as you lived on your Terra. You are in a different Yahweh and you will have time to live here, to build a decent life. This Yahweh may not even die during your lifetime. It may take several generations on this planet before the eventually Resistance arrives. You will be in your country again, just as it was when you died. It is as if you have been resurrected and given additional years to live.”*

Gúzman shook his head and said: *“Planets? Stars? Yahwehs? I understand nothing of all of this. I am a priest from a bygone era. I understand one thing – that my faith was false, that my ideas were wrong, that my son became a demon, and that my own world is gone.”*

“You must try to be happy. You must try to live.”

“Why do you care?” Gúzman hissed.

The creature placed a hand on the priest’s shoulder and sang soothingly: *“You must try to live without that poison. You must try to live as a normal man here, thinking about nothing. Forget about everything you’ve seen. Forget you ever lived in another realm. This parallel universe is your home.”*

“Why are you giving me this gift?”

“I know not why. I must give you something. The others of your kind died without ever knowing the truth. I must give you a gift for living with that truth.”

The marble descended into the planet, at first surrounded by heat and then, as it slowed, by clouds. An ocean stretched forth below them with glistening waves. Clouds of black birds flew over the water. There was land. Beautiful land, with tall trees like thick masts on giant galleons, and mountains of rock. He was in his Spain once again. They floated into the wilderness, grazing past drooping leaves, listening to the sounds of coyotes singing.

“I have given you the gift of all languages. You will be able to speak to all peoples from any land. You can have a life here anywhere.”

“May I tell them of my adventures? Of all that I have seen?”

“You may, but you do not understand what you have seen.”

The marble fell to the grass abruptly and dissipated into blue energy, passing through Gúzman once again, and recoiling into the heart of the Gatekeeper. They were surrounded by trees stretching into the blue sky as a smiling sun threw rays upon them. Flowers and bushes sat patiently near roots and small birds crossed from trunk to trunk.

“Through those trees, less than three minutes from here walking,” the Gatekeeper said, pointing with a long, blue finger, “you will find people. They will house you, care for you. Begin your life anew here and find happiness.”

“That may never come,” Gúzman answered, rising to his feet, walking away from the Gatekeeper. Then, turning, he thought to ask a question: “If nothing really matters, why strive to end it all? Why not keep going? Why not let everything stay the way it is?”

The blue man paused, placed a hand on his chin and thought to himself, as if puzzled, before raising his head, directing himself to the human: “I’m not sure. It feels right, I suppose. In the end, all we have are our feelings to guide us.”

Then, the Gatekeeper was surrounded by a blue light, encased in a marble and thrown into the sky, disappearing behind the clouds before Gúzman had an opportunity to say goodbye. He had an infinite number of questions for the blue man but he was afraid to ask them, afraid of the answers. The fact that they would remain mysteries forever now comforted him.

He proceeded in the direction the Gatekeeper had indicated, coming upon two large trees near a group of moss-covered rocks. Climbing over the rocks, approaching the trunks of the trees, he steadied himself and looked down an embankment towards a river flowing below. He could make out forms in the water and he strained his eyes.

Women, as naked as wild beasts, washing themselves. Three of them. Their hair was long and black and their skin tanned, the color of dirt dried by the sun. They were tall, long-limbed and elegant. He could hear them singing, the soft melody dancing through the sunlit leaves, winding its way towards him, sinking into his ear. They washed for several more minutes, then left the river, wrapped themselves up with animal skin blankets and proceeded towards shacks along the river.

He noticed the shacks now, ramshackle habitations. Each had a thatched roof. He saw men now as well, sitting inside the shacks with their families. One man left his shack, dressed in animal skins from head to toe, and gazed out into the wilderness, crinkling his nose. Then, the man's eyes widened as he gazed directly at Gúzman.

"So, these are my new people," the priest whispered to himself. "Here I shall spend the rest of my days in misery on a parallel world."

He was met by a delegation carrying clubs, showcasing their muscular arms, animal hides draped over their shoulders. Their pug noses were marked with ritualistic cuts, as were their cheeks, and their eyes knew no fear. The women were no longer in view, tucked away inside one of the larger barracks. The men had crossed the river to meet him and to keep the river in between the stranger and their village. One of the men, the largest and strongest, approached, a club dangling at his side. He extended his hand and Gúzman shook the massive hand, smiling sadly.

"I am Gúzman," he said, his lips automatically moving to form a new language composed of sounds he didn't know he could produce. "I am a stranger here. My tribe was massacred."

The giant nodded and turned away from the priest, heading back to his assembled committee of warriors. The warriors gesticulated as they spoke amongst themselves. The giant returned to face Gúzman. He was a muscular wild man from the Basque mountains of Spain.

“We have heard of hostile tribes sending scouts to infiltrate other tribes, find their weaknesses,” the giant said. “How do we know that you are not such a scout?”

Gúzman paused and thought and answered truthfully: “You do not know.”

The giant smiled and returned to his warriors, whispering to them as they huddled together. They were an unusually tall people. They moved wildly, occasionally erupting into argument but slowly, lowering their voices to fade back into a whispered discussion. The giant left the group and returned to the stranger.

“Gúzman,” he said, “I am Resil. I am the leader of my gypsy people, the People of the River. We have a belief that if we turn away a man in need, we doom ourselves to dream of him every night. I do not wish to dream of you every night.” Resil paused, smiled and added: “I would rather dream of *women!*”

The warriors erupted into laughter. They began to wade across the river as Gúzman watched. Finally, Resil winked at the priest and the two of them began to cross to join the men on the other side. The women had heard the laughter and awaited the return of their men on the shore.

“We must not do any wrong to this stranger,” Resil announced in a thundering voice. “We must take him in as one of our own. This man has lost his tribe. They were killed. He is alone. He is now one of us and will pursue his life, his happiness here!”

Gúzman lowered his head as the villagers cheered. The people of the village patted him on the back and smiled broadly at him after he had reached the shore, assuming that his tears were tears of joy at having found a new home, but Gúzman cried for another, more insidious reason. He knew that regardless of what happened to him from this point forward, he could never

find joy in life, never forget what he knew, never recover his lost innocence, his belief, his faith.

He was a *dead man*.

As they carried her grandfather away from the hamlet, Teresa saw what appeared to be a dog hiding behind bushes. She gazed at the Old Man and pointed with her porcelain nose, indicating the hairy figure trembling behind dying leaves. The Old Man's eyes squinted as he examined the shadow.

"It's a man!" he shouted. "Get out of those bushes!"

"No," a high-pitched, cowardly voice replied. "No! I want to stay here! Here, I am safe. Here, the marauders cannot reach me!"

"Get out of there now or I will come get you!"

Finally, the figure stopped shaking and emerged. He was a short man with a stocky frame, his beard and hair long. He tried to manage a smile but it resembled the hissing face of a cat. One of his eyes was dead, pointing at the stars while his one good eye gazed directly at his new acquaintances.

"Hello," the hermit said. "I take it you are not marauders. Well...they came and they killed everyone...except for me...and your prisoner..."

"How long ago did the invaders come?" Teresa asked.

"Oh," the hermit said, chuckling, "I've counted the moons. It has been twenty-seven nights now. This prisoner should be dead. He's lived almost a month without food or water. I'm almost dead myself and I've been finding fruits and drinking storm water."

"Why didn't you free this man?" the Old Man inquired.

"Free this beast? Never!"

The stocky man fell to the ground, rolling about in laughter. Finally, he lifted himself back to his feet and jumped like a goat, bouncing to and fro before coming to a standstill. He gazed at the three figures before him as if surprised to find them real and not a figment of his imagination.

“Why didn’t you free him?” the Old Man repeated. “Why didn’t you give him food or water? Why did you leave him to die?”

“Why would I help a murderer? This man – if you want to call this thing a man – was one of the most vile torturers in all of the land. He would take women and children and slaughter them if their parents did not follow the doctrines. Our Lord came across him after invading a city and discovered who he really was. His sentence was simple! He was to experience what he made so many people experience. He was to suffer the same pain they suffered. So, he was tortured every day.”

“A murderer?” Teresa asked no one in particular.

“A beast!” The hermit replied. “A terrible, awful beast! A beast who massacred, went mad, wandered about the countryside while people assumed he had died, and was finally discovered. A fierce beast!”

The beast had sapphire eyes and a long snout sounding out a trembling call, announcing its dominance over this jungle habitat, this collection of tall trees with thick bodies and flowers of the deepest blues, most passionate reds, and royal purples. It stomped its feet, causing the grass and the dandelions to tremble before its might, and it proceeded across the clearing, its ears perked to detect the slightest vibration.

From behind the safety of the bushes, the savage pointed his long, thin finger at the boar and nodded to another man. One hunter was tall and thin, his limbs like the legs of a mantis, and the other was short and stocky, his face painted red. Both men had long, black hair swaying in the wind, and spears of wood strapped to their backs by straps fashioned from vines. The smaller gypsy, his thick arms pulsating with anticipation, was Studeu, and the tall man was Entino. Behind them, several yards away, hiding near another set of bushes, were the rest of the hunters.

“We must take it now,” Studeu hissed, flexing his muscles. “If we do not run now and kill it, it will escape.”

“No,” Entino responded in a tone that announced his higher position within the tribal hierarchy. “We have been told that this is to be a test of the newcomer.”

“I want to kill it,” Studeu begged. “Please, let me kill it. I haven’t had meat in so long.”

“No!” Entino snapped.

The boar turned its eyes towards them, pausing to examine the bushes, but the two men were too fast for the beast and had ducked down, pressing themselves against the dirt. Entino reached over to slap the back of Studeu’s head. Then, he gazed through the bush at the creature. The beast had lowered its head over a patch of grass, sucking up the blades.

“You idiot,” Entino whispered. “You almost gave us away!”

“I did not,” Studeu whined.

“You did!”

Entino turned towards the remainder of the tribe and snaked his way over a log and mounds of dirt and grass until he had reached them. Resil sat there, smoking his pipe calmly, in silence, while the newcomer twiddled his thumbs. The priest, once known as Gúzman, was now known as Guztram, the term for “lost man” in the strange, Basque gypsy tribal language.

“It is all ready, sir,” Entino whispered, addressing himself to the giant Resil.

The giant smiled and nodded to Guztram, now dressed not in robes but in the black hides of beasts. The former priest grabbed his spear, resting against a rock, and followed Entino, snaking his way over the ground to the first set of bushes looking out over the clearing. They found Studeu sitting on his behind, picking his nose, scowling in frustration.

“This kill should have been mine,” the muscular man whimpered as they approached. “It should be mine and not the newcomer’s.”

“This kill is Guztram’s kill!” Entino retorted with a silent hiss, smiling at the former priest. “He will prove himself. You will see. You shut up!”

“Don’t tell me to shut up!”

“Shut up!”

Gúzman, now Guztram, the Lost Man, squinted his eyes, examining the boar. He felt fear rush through him, coursing through his veins. He would have said a prayer then but he no longer believed in anything. He had lost his son, his boy with the golden hair, his world – but, most of all, he had lost his faith in the order of things. Nothing seemed to matter, least of all his own miserable life.

He grabbed his spear and walked around the bushes, stepping into the clearing. Then, like a madman, he hoisted his spear above his head and dashed towards the animal, racing, leaping forward. He prepared himself to toss his spear at the boar, aiming at its head, hoping to pierce its skull and maim its brain, but the animal had heard him. It turned its eyes towards him and it did not run away.

No, it ran *towards* him at an alarming speed, its tusks heading for his body. He leaned back and then leaned forward, releasing the spear with a fluid movement, watching it arc into the air and penetrate the left eye of the beast, making it squeal. But the beast was not deterred from its path. It ran towards him even *faster*, propelled forward by a desire for revenge, by an unstoppable anger. Guztram, the Lost Man, the former priest, once known as Gúzman, had missed his target, had failed to pierce the creature's skull. So, the former priest ran, turning towards the woods, leaping towards the protection of the darkness provided by leaves.

“Run! Run!” he could hear Entino shouting.

“Turn around! Face the beast!” he could hear Studeu screaming.

“Run!”

“Face the beast!”

The Lost Man turned and faced the creature, closing his eyes, extending his arms as if to embrace the thing, preparing himself for death, but death did not come to him. It denied its blessings to his suffering soul. Resil, the giant, had stepped forward from behind the bushes and tossed his spear at the creature, piercing its head. The creature fell forward, landing on top of Guztram, crushing him under its weight.

“Help him!” Resil shouted at his two subordinates. “He is hurt!”

“Useless devil,” Studeu snarled, running out from behind the bushes towards the fallen man. He was followed by Entino. The two men attempted to lift the corpse of the fallen boar, struggling against its frame to no avail, until the giant arrived and easily tossed the dead animal aside.

“He is a useless idiot,” Resil whispered to himself, standing over the Lost Man. “Lift him up. I will take the prey back myself. You carry this half-man to the healer.”

The Lost Man was carried back in a state of semi-consciousness, muttering to himself about the need for truth, the reality behind all things, and how he wished he could become a boy once again. In his mind, he was drifting across an ocean of images – his son, the demon Agares, the Gatekeeper, and the locusts. He saw his son standing before him, smiling, and then watched as his skin fell off his body and the visage of the demon was revealed, and a cloud of locusts swarmed around the two of them and devoured them, piece by piece...

Water.

When he came to his senses, he was no longer in that clearing.

He felt his chin, examining the length of his beard. Days had passed. At least a week. A man with a face painted yellow and blue was standing before him with sad eyes and thick gray hair falling over his shoulders. The man smiled when he saw that the Lost Man had awakened. Standing behind him was a portly woman, around thirty-five years of age, her face wrinkled and her eyebrows thick, her long black hair reaching her waist.

“I am Hardet, the healer,” the man said, “and this is my wife Tyrva.”

“Hello,” the portly woman said, bowing her head and smiling with stained teeth.

“You were trampled,” Hardet continued. “The men from the village brought you to me to heal you. I used all of the wisdom of our tribe to save you, Guztram.”

“Thank you,” the Lost Man replied. “You shouldn’t have bothered.”

“Why say such a thing?” Tyrva exclaimed, pressing her corpulent hands on her round cheeks. “Do you not want to live? Life here is so beautiful, so full of wonder.”

“Never mind,” the Lost Man answered. “Am I well?”

Hardet gazed at his wife Tyrva and his wife returned his gaze. Then, they turned together to smile nervously at their patient. He was surrounded by clay jugs filled with liquids of all hues, pieces of fruit, vines, and leaves, lying on the floor of a shack, illuminated by the light pouring in from the entrance.

Hardet pointed a steady finger at the Lost Man’s right arm – but the lost man had *no right arm*. Instead, where his arm had been, there was a stump covered with large leaves tied tightly to his body by an intricate web of vines carefully intertwined. In a corner of the hut, flies resting on his fingers, the former priest could see his missing arm, amputated from him by the sharpened rock of a bloody axe leaning against the shack wall.

“M-m-my arm,” the Lost Man mumbled.

“It was crushed,” the healer explained. “There was no way to save it. We were able to cut it from your body and burn your flesh to close the wound. You survived. We have our traditions, our knowledge to thank for that.”

“Yes,” his wife agreed, nodding her head vigorously, “you were very lucky to have survived such an ordeal. We are very glad that you are still here with us.”

“You are a lucky man!”

The Lost Man lifted himself to his feet and discovered that he was nude, gazing at Tyrva with a sudden flood of shame. But she did not blush or lower her head. She grabbed a kilt made of animal hide, handing it to him. He took the hide and tried to wrap it around his lower half with one arm several times until Tyrva walked to him and held an edge of the hide for him while he wrapped the other edge around.

She smelled like salted fish but also *femininity*, the sweet odor of soft flesh, gentle smiles, compassion, understanding. He wanted to touch her, kiss her, as she wrapped the vine around his waist and tied it, holding the kilt in place. Her lips were a soft burgundy.

“I am so thankful for everything you have done,” he whispered. “I am a man who should not live anymore. All desire for existence has been drained out of me.”

“You should not say such things,” she stated, looking away from him. “People will think you mad. You are not like any man I have ever met before.”

“Maybe I am mad,” he said. “But even mad men need companionship.”

“I have just the thing for you!” she exclaimed, running out of the shack.

She returned a few minutes later, pulling at a dog with a collar made out of vine. He was a mangy thing, yellow with patches of black covering his thin frame, blotches of skin exposed on his back and paws. His nose was black with pink and his eyes were bleary, as if he had just been awakened. Tyrva pushed the dog towards the Lost Man but the dog did not seem to be interested in him. The Lost Man knelt on the ground and placed his hand on the animal’s head, stroking it gently.

“This is Hiu,” Tyrva said. “He is a silly mutt.”

“How old is he?” the Lost Man inquired. “He looks like a puppy.”

“I am not sure.”

The rain began to fall in heavy droves and the healer ran back to his shack, finding the Lost Man, his wife and the dog sitting together near the center of the habitation. Tyrva was smoking her pipe and the dog was yawning. The Lost Man, Guztram, was humming to himself. The healer wondered how the man could be so calm after losing an arm. He would not be able to hunt anymore. He would not be able to climb trees or wrestle or fight. What sort of man could accept this so calmly?

“Where I am from,” the Lost Man began, “we had many wars fought by wealthy men. People believed many things about the world. I believed many things.”

“You speak like the men from the cities,” the healer sneered. “They are always speaking about *rich* and *poor*, about what they believe and what they do not. Here, in our tribe, we have no such silliness.”

“A blessed place this is,” the Lost Man said. “Before, when I was still known as Gúzman, I had a strong son with golden hair. I left him, turned my back on him, and he became a monster. Now, I am here alone, a lost man, a ‘guztram.’”

“You are mad.”

The healer grabbed his pipe from a corner of the shack and used two rocks to light a small bunch of blades of grass. He lit the pipe with the burning bunch and threw the bunch into the rain to be extinguished by the elements. The man and his wife smoked silently. The dog slept, occasionally licking its lips, dreaming of food.

“Are there any cities, nearby?” the Lost Man inquired, turning away from the rain towards the healer and his wife. “How far away is the closest one?”

The healer and his wife laughed. Even the dog appeared to awaken and smile at him.

“How could you not know about the cities?” the healer asked. “You must come from a truly different place. Everyone knows about the cities.”

“He is strange,” Tyrva observed. “He looks at things as if he is from the stars.”

The healer nodded, gazing pensively at the Lost Man’s eyes. Then, he said: “The nearest city is Bilbao. Several thousand people live there, living lives of war and sin. If you go there, you will be infected by those things. Stay here and the tribe will protect you.”

The Lost Man smiled politely, looking back out at the rain. He had been Gúzman and now he was the Lost Man. He had been a priest and now he was an armless wanderer. He had been strong but now he had no desire to stand.

“I have nothing to offer your people,” the Lost Man said. “I will set out for the city of Bilbao. I am already infected by war and sin.”

“I will take you before the Leader once the rain stops,” the healer replied.

The man grabbed one of the jugs of liquid resting amiably in a corner of the shack and handed it to his guest. The former priest drank from the jug and passed it back to the healer. The healer drank and then his wife imbibed the thick, white liquid. Then, Tyrva began to sing, her shrieks forcing the dog to use his paws to cover his ears and the husband to bow his head and close his eyes as if being jabbed in the stomach – but the Lost Man chuckled and felt a taste of joy, hearing human sounds of merriment once again. Then, Tyrva stopped singing and the four of them – three humans and a dog – sat in silence, staring at each other.

“The liquid is a holy gypsy liquid,” Tyrva finally said, interrupting their contemplation of each other’s features. “It will present you with truth.”

“I don’t need truth,” the Lost Man replied. “I need to forget. I must -”

He stopped speaking, noticing that the woman was distorting before him. All shapes seemed to swirl about each other in concentric circles of color, mixing and then separating again. The dog was a yellow smudge of circles, the man a collage of round eggs of various colors, and the woman...well, the woman looked beautiful. He wanted to touch the woman, to kiss her, to hold her in his arms. The husband was watching him, but he was no longer the husband. He had changed. He was the blue man – Gatekeeper Two, staring at him, smiling at him.

“You condemned me to this!” Gúzman said.

“Forget about everything,” Gatekeeper Two replied. “You can still be Gúzman here if you choose. The Gúzman from this world has already died but I have brought you back in his place. You have been resurrected, Gúzman.”

“Gúzman is dead. I am the Lost Man!”

“You are Gúzman. You will always be him. Accept that and forgive yourself.”

“I just want to forget it all!”

Gúzman jumped up to his feet and raced to the healer’s wife, leaping on top of her, propelled by the desire to enter her, to see if the happiness he desired could be found within her feminine form. He placed his hands on her breasts and kissed her neck, feeling her energy, the

raw power streaming into him from those circles of color, shooting into him, making him stronger. He kissed her neck again and went to her lips, red lips composed of thousands of little circles. She kicked and punched him, but he did not care. He *needed* to kiss her, *needed* to feel human lips against his once more.

But before he was able to kiss her again, something grabbed a hold of him and pulled him back, a force he could not comprehend, a dark red cloud with arms. At first, he thought that it might be his son, his beautiful boy in the form of the demon Agares. He called out for his son but received no answer. The cloud struck at him with its powerful arms. Blood began to fall from his mouth, his nose began to swell, and the world came and went from his perception with each strike.

“Stop it! You’ll kill him!” he heard the healer’s wife shout.

“He deserves to die, the rascal!” the healer answered.

“Look at him! His nose is crooked, broken. His teeth are gone. Stop!”

“One last thing!”

“No! No! Don’t do it, husband!”

Yellow. Red. The colors swirled about Gúzman’s mind as the pain jugged through his skull and into his neurons, sending them into confusion with mixed signals, odd whirring sounds and blips and ringing bells of faraway churches. The pain was unbearable and the former priest released a blood curdling scream that shook the shack to its very foundations. He could feel blood dripping down his face, accumulating inside his mouth. The Gatekeeper appeared to him again, whispering to him, fading in and out, smiling but crying simultaneously. Then, there was nothing but blackness.

The darkness seemed to last an eternity, but the Gatekeeper finally appeared. Gúzman could see him clearly now, his blue skin shining as if illuminated by some source within. They were alone, floating in that black pool, where there were no stars or people or gods. Here, they were two beings, living with a pain in their hearts that they could not extinguish.

“The resistance is doing very well,” the Gatekeeper said. “We are reaching our objectives at a much faster pace than we had anticipated. You still have time until the true end of all things. You could have a family, have children.”

“I don’t want anything anymore,” the priest answered. “I just want to forget everything. I’m back in Spain, back to my life, a universe just like the one I left behind but I don’t want to be here. Damn you for this blasted truth you gave me. I didn’t need it.”

“It is as hard for me to live with it as it is for you,” the Gatekeeper confessed. “Maybe that is the real reason for the resistance. We want to end everything, to destroy all things, because we can’t bear the knowledge of the truth behind them.”

“I don’t care about a damn thing you have to say anymore,” Gúzman sobbed. “Let me live the rest of my days drinking myself to sleep.”

The Gatekeeper nodded and sped away until he was a tiny blue dot and then he was gone. Gúzman floated alone in the darkness for several minutes, spinning in place, until he was sucked down and the blackness turned to whiteness, as if a black cloth had been lifted from a window. The sun was shining brightly on his unshaven face and a cacophony of voices struck out against him, screaming “seducer” and “traitor.” He felt his face, noticing that leaves and vines covered one of his eyes. Someone slapped his hand away and told him not to touch that eye.

He was on the grass by the river, the stream he had crossed when he had first arrived at this village. He could not remember how long ago that was. Time did not exist in this place in quite the same manner as it did elsewhere. The hours tended to melt into each other.

“My husband was only protecting me,” Tyrva was saying to the other congregants standing around him. Ten people were gazing at him with eyes full of contempt. “We never know what these strangers might do!”

“Yes,” the woman standing next to her, a fat old wench, responded, “he looks like a cur, the bastard. I hope they kill him!”

A tall, muscular man with broad shoulders and scars on his cheeks gazed down at him with disdain, remarking with a sneer: “I’d like to challenge him to a fight. I’ll wager the coward has no backbone and that beating him would be easier than beating an old codger!”

The crowd erupted into laughter, spitting on Gúzman. They threw rocks, fruit, sticks, and pots and pans at him. His hand ran over his face and touched his eye, his right eye – why wasn’t he able to see out of his right eye?

“They took my eye,” he muttered. “My eye...”

Indeed his eye had been carved out of him by the healer and now, where his orb of sight had once been, there was only a well of scarred flesh, freshly melted. The healer had been kind enough to sear the wound after he had stabbed into his face. The crowd was chanting now: “Kill him! Take his head!” They repeated the same chant a thousand times, until another, more authoritative voice interrupted them.

“Silence!” Resil shouted. Gúzman turned towards him, looking him over the man with his one eye, admiring his giant physique, wishing he could be so strong and proud – but he had no faith to give him strength and he had done nothing in his life that could bring him pride.

Resil continued, addressing himself to the maimed man: “Guztram, we accepted you here in this village, made you one of us. We offered you a life here after your own life had been taken from you. Yet, you did not accept this favor with the heart of a good man – you spit upon our hospitality and you made me look like a fool for having brought you here. You are not a good man. Your nature is not a good nature.”

“Please,” Gúzman muttered, “take my life. I am an evil, terrible man.”

Resil chuckled and shook his head: “I will not do you the favor of ending your miserable life. That would make me a murderer and it would spare you the pain you deserve, the pain of living out the rest of your days as a wretch. You do not deny that you attacked the healer’s wife?”

“I do not deny it,” Gúzman answered.

“You are quite clearly insane,” Resil responded. “I pity you and your weak mind, Guztram. I cast you out of this village, condemn you to live out in the world, a maimed, sad man. We will show you mercy.”

Resil clapped his hands and a short man with a corpulent stomach and a bald head surrounded by small tufts of brown hair stepped forward. He had a small nose, pressed tightly against his round face. The man smiled and nodded at Resil, his fat cheeks glowing.

“This is Juklar,” Resil said, pointing at the man. “He will take you out of the woods to the path. The path will lead the two of you past the mountains, past the towns, and to Bilbao. It is a wretched place, filled with despicable people such as yourself. It is a city of murderers, thieves and human dogs.”

“You will fit right in, sir,” Juklar interjected, smiling politely. “They are just your sort of folks there! You will be one of many dogs!”

Gúzman lifted himself up and walked towards the dwarf-like man. They shook hands and walked past the crowd. Soon, they were invisible, swallowed whole by the forest. They walked in silence, proceeding down rocky hills and up more rocky hills, stepping over fallen trees covered with moss. Five hours they walked together without speaking, Juklar smiling his polite smile and Gúzman bumping into trees.

The day ended, the sun falling from the sky, giving way to a star-filled night and a yellow Spanish moon staring down at them through the leaves. Butterflies swam past them in the humid air and owls hooted as squirrels raced from tree to tree and unidentified animals made unidentifiable noises. Juklar said nothing, but he stopped in his tracks and sat down, leaning against a tree.

“We have to sleep now,” Juklar stated, his permanent smile refusing to fade.

“What is it like in Bilbao?” Gúzman asked.

Juklar sighed and answered in a low whisper: “It is a city of sin, a city of outcasts. They call the king of Bilbao King of the Damned. Former prisoners of war, deserters, mercenaries – all

types of scum, exiled from their tribes, find their way to Bilbao. To survive there should not be difficult for a man without morals. There will be plenty of work for you, my friend.”

Gúzman paused and said: “You know, Juklar, this life is nothing but a fraud. This world is one of many worlds and the creators of these worlds live on forever, using us – the living organisms – as nutrition to feed their perpetual lives. They have beings called Gatekeepers who serve them. Except now, the Gatekeepers are rebelling, fed up with the meaninglessness of it all. They are trying to kill the creators.”

Juklar closed his eyes and licked his lips, resting his hands on his belly, muttering to himself in a soft, compassionate voice: “Our leader was right to spare you your life. It is not your fault you attacked the healer’s wife. You are clearly mad as a cat in heat.”

The short, fat man began to snore, leaving Gúzman alone with the sounds of the wilderness playing around him like a primitive orchestra. He decided that he would forget all of his troubles. He would make himself forget the Gatekeepers, his past life, his five hundred years of torture, his missing eye and arm – all of it would be drowned away in liquor.

He began to wonder whether he was mad, whether he had dreamed of another life, concocted Gatekeepers, sons, demons, his past. Those memories were beginning to fade. He could only feel a sharp pain striking against his membranes, a hammer striking his cranium time and time again. Why were his memories fading away so fast? Perhaps his eye was infected and he was sick. Or perhaps he had lost too much blood? His son’s face had once been so clear in his mind, but he could not remember it now.

He sat against a tree and closed his eye. He experienced no dreams that night – what dreams could a man without a past or future have? What nightmares could frighten him?

TEN – THE AMUSING CITY LIFE IN ALL OF ITS BOHEMIAN INTENSITY

The clock struck ten and the General, his military hat slung across his balding head at an odd angle over his few remaining black hairs, released a burp as the chimes filled the room. The man next to him, the Banker, picked his nose with a long finger and removed a green ball of mucus decorated with bits of unidentifiable residue. The Banker wiped his finger on the counter and grabbed his mug of beer. The General grabbed his mug of beer at the same time and the two, sitting directly next to each other inside an empty bar, leaned their heads back as the potion slithered into their bodies.

“Good brew this new ale!” the Banker exclaimed, slamming his mug against the counter and wiping the froth from his face with a sleeve. “I needed this drink after a long day of arduous work!”

“Work, Mr. Banker?” the other sneered, gently placing his mug down, using his dainty fingers to clean his mustache. “You know nothing about it, do you now? About work, I mean.”

“Know nothing about what, sir?” the Banker asked. “About work, you say?”

“Yes, about work, you old buzzard. What the hell else could I be talking about?”

“I know plenty about work, General!” the Banker retorted, his fists clenched, his face a ruddy bundle of grease. “I know a lot more about work than some overpaid military fop!”

“How dare you?” the General squealed, his hand floating down to the golden hilt of his sword. “I ought to cut your head off, you idiot!”

The owner, an old barman they knew as Py, smelled blood and approached, his back curved. He patted both men on the shoulder and smiled a toothless smile. Then, he grabbed each of their mugs and placed them under the ale barrel, filling them to the brim and then sliding the ales back to the two miscreants.

“Isn’t that Guztram’s job?” the Banker inquired, casting a look at the one-armed man with an eyepatch muttering to himself, sitting alone on a chair in the corner. “Is old Guztram too busy with his ravings?”

“He’s mad,” Py replied, laughing with his raspy voice. “You need to give a mad man breaks or he’ll have himself a fit in here, scare everyone away. I give him three breaks a day and he sits there, talking to himself about the stars and nothingness and this and that.”

“What’s his story?” the General inquired.

“Heard he used to be a priest but his bastard son killed himself and he went mad,” the Banker replied. “Started wandering around the woods alone, everyone thinking he was dead, and then a tribe came across him. They took him in but he attacked the medicine man’s wife and they cast him out.”

“That’s right,” Py confirmed. “He’s useful is all I care about. Cleans up after the customers, takes most of the punches in the face when I need to break up fights.”

“He live alone?” the General inquired.

“No,” the barman replied, shaking his head. “He lives with Martiria, the old woman. Her family was killed in a raid as well and she went insane. Seems that the people who killed her family used her and she came down with a disease. Now, our friend here has it. Seems the disease has made him even more lost, even more mad.”

The three men turned to ponder the sight of the man in tatters, babbling to himself, the Banker releasing a sad burp followed by the soft whistle of flatulence. The General burped in solidarity and Py the Barman patted his two good customers on their shoulder, happy that he had prevented a fight from breaking out in the bar.

Py left the counter to sit at a table, picking up a scroll draped across the surface, reading each word carefully, as if imbibing the nutrients contained in the verbs. Suddenly, he pounded the table angrily and rose to his feet, casting the scroll aside, pointing a finger into the air menacingly.

“Revolution!” he shouted, the pock marks on his face glistening with sweat. “That’s what we need in this city, my friends! A revolution!” The Banker yawned lazily and the General rolled his eyes, but Py continued, his finger still pointed up towards the ceiling: “We are going to be invaded, all of us know it. But our leaders refuse to provide us with the defense we deserve! I’d like to know why, personally, ladies and gentlemen. I’d like it if someone could tell me!”

No one answered, Py felt neglected, and the room fell into silence once more. The Banker finished his beer and picked at his nose, while the General stared into space whistling. Py picked the scroll up from the floor and sat back down, trying to concentrate. He read voraciously, pausing only to scratch his chin. The silence lasted for several more minutes and was only broken when Guztram lifted himself up and walked to his boss, remarking: “My break is over.”

Guztram went past the counter, sitting behind the bar, grabbing a jug of wine, drinking directly from the jug. He was feeling the touch of sobriety and decided to fight it with all his might. He drank the contents of the jug down in one gulp while the General and the Banker observed in awe. They clapped for him when he finally put the empty jug down.

“Nothing I like better than a good drinker! The best drinker in Spain!” the General squealed. “My dear fellow, your tolerance for the substance is legendary!”

“I’m sure it helps that he is crazy,” the Banker noted. “Mad persons do not get drunk like us regular folk.”

“They do too!” the General retorted. “My sister had a crazy brother. You couldn’t give that boy a sip of wine. He’d go absolutely insane, start flailing his arms around, screaming!”

The discussion was interrupted by the arrival of a boy with a long bangs and a scarf wrapped around his neck. The boy was skinny, tall, with long limbs and a sour, pouty expression. He was fourteen, maybe fifteen, but his cherub-like, oval face gave him the appearance of a younger child. The boy waved his hands above his head and shouted: “Outside the walls! Outside the walls! Look outside the walls!”

The General recognized the child as his son and slapped him upside the head, asking him to stop speaking in riddles. Stunned, the boy fell to the ground but jumped up to his feet quickly and continued his dance, pointing and shouting “Outside the walls! Outside the walls!” Frustrated, the General walked over to the window of the tavern and looked out at a misty horizon. He could see black trees and grass, a frothy moat, and farmers laboring...and...

He squinted, trying to make out the contents of a black spot amidst that bucolic scene, a smudge that appeared to be moving. He strained his eyes and, suddenly, he could make out spears and a horse. He used all of his drunken strength to decipher that pictogram, and he was able to see more horses and more spears.

“An invasion,” he whispered to himself. “It’s a blooming invasion!”

“What’s that, General?” the Banker shouted, trying to understand the General’s words. “Can’t make out what you’re saying, old chap. Speak up! Speak up!”

“It’s an invasion!” the General repeated loudly, turning to the occupants of the bar. “There’s some kind of invading army approaching us. They mean to invade us.”

“Maybe it is some sort of delegation,” the Banker said. “Diplomats?”

The General muttered something unintelligible to himself and turned back to the window, utilizing his trained sight to further dissect that approaching image, still several miles away. He saw the spears once again, the horses, but now he could see a flag as well. He concentrated and, suddenly, he could see a black flag with a yellow cross.

“No,” the General shouted at the Banker. “No, this is an invasion. They mean to sack the city, take what they can.”

“They’ll rape our women!” the Banker murmured. “My poor Bertilda! They’ll take my poor Bertilda!”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that,” Py interjected sympathetically, “I don’t think the pirates are that desperate. No one could want that ugly cow!”

“Oh you really think so?” the Banker said, his voice full of cheer and hope. “You are a kind fellow! Thank you, my friend. I just couldn’t bear it if anything happened to my poor, ruddy little Bertilda! I do love that woman.”

“Are you going to go join the defensive forces, General?” Py inquired, cleaning a beer mug with a rag. “I imagine they could use their General right about now.”

The General paused to reflect, rubbing his chin. The marauders were a vastly superior fighting force of nomadic warriors, a remnant of the Moorish wars, rebels who have concocted their own customs and religion. They would steal riches, take some of the women, and then they would leave. It appeared to the General that resisting them was the least intelligent thing that they could do. They would lose men in the process.

“No,” the General pronounced bravely, “I do not think so. Sometimes, a statesman must make the hard choice and he must decide what is best for his people, sacrificing his pride, his manly thirst for battle.”

“Quite so, quite so,” the Banker agreed.

“Naturally, a wise choice,” Py said, nodding his head.

“In this situation,” the General continued, “I believe that my manly pride – remembering the glory of my prior battles, my great deeds – would vainly compel me to take up arms to defend this city, our home. However, such vanity (and my own manly instincts, I might add) must be resisted here as it would lead us to heartbreak and tragedy.”

“Tragedy, tragedy,” Py repeated.

“Quite so, quite so,” the Banker reiterated.

“Thus,” the General announced, his finger pointed at the ceiling of the tavern, “I make the brave decision to repress my natural, vigorous, courageous thirst for battle and refuse to take up arms against the invading armies. I will remain here, in this tavern, resisting the urge to obey my sword’s thirst for the blood of the enemy!”

“Hurrah!” Py shouted.

“What a hero! What a jolly great hero!” the Banker squealed, clapping his hands, his eyes welling up with tears at the sight of such heroism.

The General rejoined the other men at the bar, drinking a mug of warm beer while the Banker and Py admired him in all his strategic glory. Guztram, the Lost Man, sat behind the bar silently, his one eye focused on the faces of the three men, his one hand coiled tightly around a second bottle of wine. He drank this bottle slowly, feeling the world evaporate into a haze of blue men and Yahwehs and angels and locusts. He had begun to wonder whether he really was mad. Had he seen any of the things he believed he had seen? Had he ever been a priest in a parallel universe? Had that world ended? Or had it all been a vision produced by his syphilis?

“You know,” he spit in a slurred speech, addressing himself to the others. “I come from another world... it is a place called Terra, or Earth... we had priests and Catholics, demons and angels, devils...and blue men they called the Gatekeepers... but the Gatekeepers are rebelling against the Gods, against the Yahwehs because they’ve all gone mad... they don’t want to live a purposeless perpetual existence anymore... I don’t either...I just want to end it... I want it all to end...”

The bar erupted into laughter, the General leaning back to release bellicose laughter. Finally, the laughter ceased and the General leaned against the bar, throwing a wink at Py and the Banker.

“So, my good fellow,” the General hissed, his serpentine tongue pressed against his teeth, “tell us more about this fabulous world you come from! Tell us more about this world of demons, angels and all the rest of it.”

“I was a priest,” Guztram, the Lost Man said. “I was chosen by God to fight for him but I came to realize that my faith, everything I believed in, was a hoax. I was once known as Gúzman.”

“And now the former holy man has no faith!” the General summarized, stamping a heavy hand against the bar. “A tragedy of the first order!”

“Gúzman, what a silly name,” the Banker said.

The General’s son, still standing by the door, not having moved since announcing to his father the necessity of taking up defensive positions, asserted himself. The boy stepped forward and pointed a finger at his father, announcing: “You should go lead your army! Put down your drink and go to war! Protect us! People are going to die!”

The General jumped out of his seat and drove the boy out of the bar with a terrible mixture of slaps, kicks, and punches, leaving the child covered with bruises. Then, the boy gone, the General sat back down at the bar and took a swig of his beer, muttering to himself about how today’s youth lack responsibility and respect. The Banker agreed, slapping his friend upon the shoulder in solidarity, while Py spoke about the need to apply the rod to disrespectful children.

“I’ve been too lenient on the boy,” the General lamented.

“He doesn’t understand what a truly great statesman you are!” Py said.

The men drank in silence, Guztram glued tightly to his jug of wine. He finished the jug and grabbed another. His vision was too blurry for him to make out the faces of the other men at the bar now. He began to talk to himself about ghostly visions while the others observed him.

“He really is quite mad,” the Banker smirked.

“A crazy, diseased fool,” the General agreed.

“I’m sick of his banter,” Py stated.

They continued drinking in silence until shouts and the sounds of battle began to stream into the bar from the hall. Men were dying, women were being violated and blood and entrails were being spilled on the sad grey tiles. The Banker tip-toed to the door, gently pulling it open and placing his head into the hallway. He saw only the angry faces of strangers and deduced that the men from the city had been killed or were hiding.

The men he did see had skin as black as night, their limbs muscular and their swords decorated with crimson liquid. They wore black robes. The bar looked out into a hallway with gold railings. Just over the gold railings, several floors below, at the center of the city, were the

city gardens, decorated with plush trees and bushes. The Banker could see the bodies of men hanging from the trees.

Yes, the men were all dead (or in hiding or fleeing) and the women had taken up arms. Women of all stripes – housemaids, prostitutes, noble wives, and seamstresses – threw themselves at the intruders, carrying swords. The Banker ducked back into the bar and closed the door. Py approached and used a massive key to turn the lock.

“We’ll be safe here,” the General whimpered. “I wish I was out there fighting. I’d wager it would be a good death!”

“Silliness,” the Banker replied, sitting back down at the bar. “The city will need good statesmen such as yourself to rebuild. The women are fighting. It makes sense, really, if you think about it. They are the most expendable.”

“Useless,” Py agreed, nodding his head, “absolutely useless, they are. Makes sense, I say. Makes sense. We need good men to rebuild.”

The shouts of women in the heat of battle grew louder and louder until they seemed to cease simultaneously, the entire city falling into a deathly silence lasting the better part of an hour. The men at the bar had gone through several jugs of wine and mugs of beer by the time a loud knock was heard.

“S-should we open the door?” the Banker asked.

“I dunno, no think, no think so, don’t think so,” the General replied, shaking his head, drool accumulating on his chin before falling onto the counter.

“W-watch my bar,” Py said, using a rag to wipe up the General’s spittle.

“S-s-s-oo-rry,” the General said, smiling sheepishly.

The knock at the entrance grew more insistent, but the men continued sitting at the bar without moving. A half hour passed in silence, the men continuing to empty jugs of wine. Then, a battering ram could be heard.

“Should we resist?” Py inquired, his hands wringing his rag nervously.

“Of course not,” the General replied. “We are outnumbered. It would be hopeless. We are not fools.”

“Listen to the General,” the Banker said, “he is a brave, dedicated statesman and he knows about such things! We must listen to him!”

The door exploded into splinters and the invaders charged in. There were six of them, tall, strong and armed with their jagged, bloody swords. The tallest and strongest among them stepped forward and surveyed the scene.

“Bloody drunks,” the invader snarled. “They’re just a bunch of bloody drunks! More cowardly than the women!”

“I have never seen a city like this,” another invader remarked. “Here, the women fight and the men hide, run away, or await the end of the battle in bars.”

“We made a strategic decision,” the Banker retorted, stepping forward, approaching the men. “I hope that we can talk about all of this and reach a reasonable agreement with regards to this entire matter.”

The tallest, strongest of the invaders ran at the Banker and thrust his sword through the man’s skull, the blade entering the Banker’s forehead and exiting through the back of his cranium. Then, the invader used a foot to push the banker off his blade and the man fell dead upon the floor, his blood draining from his deformed head.

“I have no respect for cowards!” the invader shouted.

“Kill them!” One of the other invaders screamed.

The General cleared his throat and stepped forward: “I know where there is much gold. I can show you where the gold is...if you agree to let me go.”

“Let *us* go,” Py added.

“Yes,” the General said, casting a disapproving glance at the interrupting barman. “Yes, I will let you know where the gold is if you let us go.”

The invaders charged forward like a swarm of mad bees and, stinging their opponents, shouting in tongues, singing holy chants of war and murder, they hacked and stabbed both the General and Py. There was nothing left of them. Where two men had once stood, pieces of unidentifiable matter sat in dark red pools.

One of the invaders walked around the bar and stood face to face with Guztram and asked him his name. Guztram replied that they called him Guztram but that his real name was Gúzman.

“Where do you come from?”

“A place far, far away from here. Another world, a parallel God.”

“Another God?”

“Yes, all of us live inside the bodies of Gods. Yahwehs we call them. Each Yahweh is a separate universe and all of us live in each one of these separate universes.”

“And how did you find yourself here?”

“I was condemned to Hell. The Yahwehs sustain themselves through the power of good souls. They separate the bad and the good. They accumulate the good in a place called Heaven and discard the bad in a place called Hell. They use the Good as a sort of food to bring an end to a cycle and begin another. In this manner, they live on forever and - ”

“You are mad!”

Another invader walked towards the bar and demanded water. Without blinking an eye, Guztram picked up the General’s mug and filled it. Then, he handed the mug to the invader. The remaining invaders sat at the bar and requested water. The invader facing Guztram walked away from him and sat down next to his comrades. The invaders laughed and cussed and discussed the battle, fresh blood covering their faces. They drank two barrels of water before the largest one spoke to Guztram. Two hours had passed since they had murdered the General, Py and the Banker.

“We do not kill madmen,” the invader hissed.

“You seem to have no problem killing women,” Guztram said.

The invader laughed and explained that they had never killed women before. Only in *this* city were the men so cowardly that the women fought their battles. The invader explained that they could not kill madmen, but that their Lord was fond of torture.

“We will hand you over to him,” the invader said. “We cannot kill you because in our traditions, we would be condemned to eternal damnation, but we can hand you over to our Lord for his sinister pleasure.”

“He will enjoy spending time with you,” another invader said.

“He will love cutting you to pieces slowly.”

Guztram grabbed the last jug of ale in the bar and slammed it on the counter, surprising the three invaders, making them grasp the hilts of their swords in preparation for battle. He offered them no resistance. He pulled the cork off the jug and drank the jug down in one gulp. Then, he slammed the empty jug down on the counter. He closed his eyes and he saw the Gatekeeper gazing at him. He wanted to kill him.

“I should have been left in Hell,” Guztram whispered to himself. “Hell was better than this parallel world. Sitting here, listening to this day after day, knowing that all of it is futile. I wish I was still in that cell.”

“Our Lord will burn you and beat you,” an invader exclaimed. “He may do worse things yet. He’s been known to take his time torturing prisoners.”

“As long as I’m allowed to drink, I don’t care.”

“That is one luxury the king *does* offer his victims. You’ll be provided with enough liquor and food to stay alive for his amusement for a long, long time.”

Guztram turned around, giving his back to the invaders. He gazed intently at a barrel of ale and pulled the cork. Then, he grasped the barrel with his hands and poured the ale down his throat. The invaders stared in amazement as the Lost Man poured the entire contents of the barrel into his body. Guztram threw the case of ale onto the floor angrily, smashing it to pieces. The three men jumped up from their stools, their swords ready to strike.

“Take me to your Lord now!” Guztram shouted, his body trembling.

“Do you see how he shakes?”

“Yes, yes – why does he shake like that?”

“Maybe he is drunk!”

“No, no... that’s not it...he has syphilis! He is sick! That is why he is mad.”

“One of the whores in this village must be his woman.”

“Take me to the king now!” Guztram repeated, beating his chest.

He followed them as they walked out of the bar and into the hallway. He continued following them as they stepped over the bodies of the female warriors, as they stepped over the body of his own companion. Tears fell from his face at the sight of Martiria – the old woman had taken him in and cared for him when no one else would speak to him. She was gone now.

Guztram followed the invaders down a flight of stairs, ending at the entrance to the city. The drawbridge had been lowered and dozens of invaders stood about laughing, their hands on their bellies or waists or scratching inside their pants or under their armpits. Flies buzzed about and an older invader, a jester of some sort, danced as yet another invader played the flute.

Guztram followed the renegade warriors across the drawbridge, coming to a man surrounded by four other men, sitting on a throne. The man was not pitch black like the others. He was yellow, like the barman, Py, had been. His eyes were dark and his face was painted blue. He wore no shirt. He was frail and womanly in appearance, his arms two thin sticks.

“Who is this?” the man said.

“He is a madman, my Lord.”

“We brought him to you for your pleasure.”

The Lord surveyed Guztram eagerly, examining his limbs and looking into his eyes, before muttering to himself: “Yes, yes! A fine specimen for torture. As soon as we settle in a city of our choosing to rest a while, I will have him placed in our town square and tortured. A bit sickly, shaking. Syphilis maybe. That must be the source of his madness. Strong enough to

withstand quite a lot of torture. I shall enjoy this specimen. I shall enjoy tearing him apart, piece by piece until there is nothing left, *nothing* left! Yes, we must settle soon, rest from our wanderings in the right place, where the stars are aligned correctly. Yes, then I will have my way with this one. He will become a living symbol of my power over men.”

DEFORMED MIND

I never judged him. I will say that for myself. The two of us were blessed with unnaturally long life, as if God had allowed us to live in sin longer to make up for the fact that we will burn in flames for millennia. He was already over a hundred and twenty years old at the time I came across him in that town square and he lived another two years after. I put up with his incessant rambling, his insane speeches, his diatribes about God and punishment. He claimed to be from a parallel world. In the end, I knew not what to think. He had murdered so many men and women that his credibility was inexistent to me. Yet, I judged him not for his past acts. He was sick and mad.

My grandfather participated in the Inquisition before he had been captured by a local ruler, an angry Lord with a sincere love of torture. The ruler strapped my father to a pole and beat him mercilessly for over a decade, breaking him. An old homeless wanderer came to me, told me about his fate, and I was blessed with a vision from God, a vision that sent me into the desert to save my grandfather. I was still a young woman. I had not these wrinkles carved into my face.

Now, I am one hundred and twenty five years old – this will be the last year, perhaps the last month, of my life. My body does not bring air into itself. I barely breathe and, when I do, the air smells stale, as if the lips of death had already kissed it. Hatred flows through my veins. Pain reverberates through my bones. I await the final stroke with anticipation. Perhaps, I will be taken to a parallel universe where I will replace myself as well.

I remember my grandfather's face when he died. I wonder if I will produce a corpse as ghostly and lonely as the one he finally became. Blue angels, planets, Gods, and universes. When his lips finally stopped, I could no longer dismiss his words as fantasy. Was he mad? Were these universes, his drawings, simply the words of a fool? He sketched carriages that could move

themselves with the word “car” underneath the sketches, cities of the future lit up by invisible forces, peoples, things. He produced dictionaries with words and concepts that I had not understood before I had read these pages. He produced diagrams, theories. He spoke often about the future, what it would look like and how it would work. He would talk and talk and talk – and many of the things he predicted soon came to be. Others, I believe will come to be in the centuries ahead. Had a Gúzman from another universe arrived to replace the Gúzman in this one? Had he died, been resurrected and placed here?

I cannot say whether he was mad or not. I had seen drawings from French papers discussing the creation of vehicles that can drive themselves with mechanical technology. I had read about the New World and the countries and peoples living therein. I had heard of the primitive peoples found in different regions of that strange continent. All of his theories, his ideas, his drawings seem to me projections of concepts already found in newspapers and books from France, England and Italy. Had not Michelangelo drawn flying contraptions?

Yet, the fervor with which he spoke cannot be dismissed. His guilt may have driven him mad, along with his loss of faith. But who is to say that, amidst that madness, he did not commune with God and the Almighty did not pass unto him knowledge of things to come? His madness could have been a war within himself, inside his soul between a Devil calling him to reject his deities, filling him with lies about the inexistence of eternal truth and a higher force, blessing him with knowledge, begging him to seek forgiveness, curing him of his inhumanity. The internal struggle within him may have been, indeed, turned into a war of angels and demons, atheistic forces and his own innate belief in a merciful Creator. All of it may have become a whirlwind inside him, unexplainable yet holding some form of truth.

Was he merely an old codger, his mind warped by torture and disease? Had he really been to Hell and back? Had he met God? Or was it all madness?

I cannot point the reader to greater conclusions than these: that my grandfather was indeed insane, unable to speak coherently, driven mad after a decade of daily torture; that he

produced these haunting drawings, papers, and diary; and that he had murdered hundreds of men, women and children. He was a murderer, a torturer, but I never judged him. No, I never judged him. I put together a story here – a story I, to a large degree, created myself – out of the materials I found in his study. It is not meant to be a scientific work of accuracy.

I hear the rain beating against the walls of my home. It is most certainly striking my husband's grave, along with my grandfather's tombstone. My daughter is an old woman herself now and she thinks *me* mad. I hear singing sometimes in her chamber. She sings a sad, soft tune of longing.

Wait...wait...

There he is! The blue angel is standing before me now, smiling, pointing to me. He is asking me to follow him. He called me from my husband's home to save my grandfather, the man who had fathered my father, made him a bastard, forced him into a life of thievery through his neglect. Where is my father? Where is my grandfather? Perhaps I will see them soon.

Yes...yes...I will follow you, my angel. To the ends of the Earth, to my own demise, past the ruins of old worlds, I will follow you. I care not for truth. Any man can give me truth, but I do not want lies... I want *you*, your *strength*, your *faith*... My heart...my hand... it...it... *I see!* Yes, *now I see!* It was just as I had always suspected... I now know...I know...

THE END